15¢

The Rio Kid Western

JUNE

PIONEER STORIES OF THE OLD WEST

SILVER OF SATAN

A Complete Bob Pryor Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

HIGH HOPE HANDICAP

A Broken Bow Story

By L. ERNENWEIN

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Thunder rides the skies

When hot-headed, handsome Lewt McCanles gallops recklessly along a trail that can lead only to flaming gunplay, a million-acre cattle empire trembles in the balance. Brother wars on brother in an action-packed, swift-shooting story of the great American Southwest in its sprawling, brawling infancy.

POPULAR LIBRARY
A LUSTY NOVEL OF THE SOUTHWEST
DUEL in the SUN
Niven Busch
THE DRAMATIC NOVEL FROM WHICH THE SELZNICK TECHNICOLOR FILM EPIC WAS MADE, STARRING JENNIFER JONES · JOSEPH COTTEN · GREGORY PECK

Don't miss

DUEL IN THE SUN

smash success of current western novels, complete and *unabridged* (originally a $2.50 best seller), now available in a glossy POPULAR LIBRARY edition for 25c. Get DUEL IN THE SUN today.

A Best Seller at $2.50

now, Popular Library Edition

only 25¢

AT ALL NEWSSTANDS NOW!

POPULAR LIBRARY

Books of Proven Merit

Starred in $6,000,000 Technicolor Production

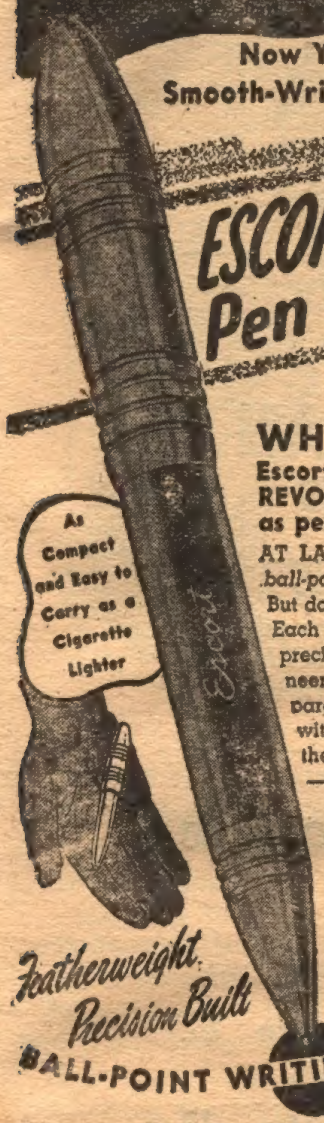
JENNIFER JONES
GREGORY PECK
JOSEPH COTTEN

Never Before has $1.95 bought so much writing satisfaction!

Now You Can Enjoy the Smooth-Writing Convenience of an

ESCORT BALL POINT Pen for Only $1.95

POSTPAID TAX FREE



WHY PAY MORE?

Escort uses the same REVOLUTIONARY principle as pens costing up to $15

AT LAST! You can own a top-quality *ball-point* pen at a rock-bottom price. But don't let Escort's low price fool you. Each feather-weight Escort Pen is a precision-built, scientifically engineered writing instrument that compares in beauty and serviceability with pens costing $10 and $15. Mail the coupon today! Send no money—pay postman $1.95 plus postage.

5-DAY TRIAL

Use your Escort Pen for 5 days. If you don't feel that it compares both in beauty and performance with pens costing many times its price, you may return it and we'll cheerfully refund every penny you paid . . . and that's a promise!

Featherweight. Precision Built

BALL-POINT WRITING PERFECTION

Compare these features with $15 ball-point pens:

- ★ Writes From 3 Months to 3 Years Without Refilling
- ★ Ink Cartridge May Be Replaced in a Jiffy
- ★ Precision-ground Ball Rolls the Ink on Dry
- ★ Handy vest-pocket or purse size (only 4 in. long)
- ★ Feather-Light (actually weighs less than 1 ounce)
- ★ Writes Under Water or High in the Sky
- ★ Lustrous Aluminum Alloy for a Lifetime of Beauty
- ★ Comes in a Choice of 6 Rich Colors:

SILVER BLACK GREEN BLUE MAROON GOLD

Now! You, too, can say "A Little Bird Told Me!"

HOT or COLD—RAIN or SHINE

Lucky Weather Bird Forecaster

WILL GIVE YOU THE SIGN

$1.98 POST PAID

When my tail is bright and blue
Sunny days will come to you.
If it turns to pink instead,
Rainy weather's just ahead.

By my neck you may be sure
Of the change in temperature.
Cold or hot . . . don't doubt my word
I'm your Lucky Weather Bird.

THIS TAG IS ATTACHED TO EACH LUCKY WEATHER BIRD

★

Sent to You on a 100% SATISFACTION GUARANTEE

★

The Winner by a Neck

★

Get the Inside Story of the Mystifying Tale of a Mystifying Tail

HIS TAIL CHANGES COLOR and FORECASTS THE WEATHER

HIS NECK IS A TRIPLE-TESTED SCIENTIFIC THERMOMETER

7" TALL

THE MOST AMAZING WEATHER FORECASTER YOU'VE EVER SEEN!

Yes, it's amazing in its accuracy, and mystifying in its simplicity—but that's not all! Your LUCKY WEATHER BIRD is a precision-built scientific instrument that compares favorably with forecasters selling for $5 or more. And no other forecaster at any price can compare with it for fun, for beauty or for downright cuteness. Its colorful gaiety lends cheer and brightness to any room you place it in. Whatever the weather outside, it's always fair weather inside if you have a LUCKY WEATHER BIRD. The moment your friends see this weather forecasting sensation, they'll want one, too. So why not play it safe and order several. Use the handy coupon . . . and ACT TODAY! Do it NOW!

SEND NO MONEY

MAIL COUPON NOW

BRIAR STRATFORD, Dept. No. Z-75 118 S. Clinton Street, Chicago 6, Ill.

Please rush me the following items listed below. If not satisfied I may return in 5 days for a complete refund.

CHECK ITEMS WANTED:

__ ESCORT Ball Point Pens.....@ $1.95 ea.
CHOICE OF COLORS—
Give First and Second Choice:
__ Silver __ Black __ Green
__ Blue __ Maroon __ Gold
__ Extra Ink Cartridges.....@ .25 ea.
__ Red __ Green __ Blue
__ Lucky Weather Bird.....@ 1.98 ea.
Total Amt. of Order $_____
Prices in Canada add 50c No C.O.D.'s.

CHECK ONE

☐ I am enclosing $_____. Send my order POSTPAID.

☐ Send C.O.D. I will pay postman $_____ plus postage.

Name_____
Please print clearly
Address_____
City_____ Zone____ State_____

The Rio Kid Western

Vol. XIV, No. 3 *A THRILLING PUBLICATION* June, 1947

A Complete Bob Pryor Frontier Action Novel

SILVER OF SATAN

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

At the behest of General Grant, the Rio Kid rides forth to recover a treasure hidden by traitors—and to stem a rising tide of rebellion that threatens national security! Follow Bob Pryor as he hurls himself against formidable foes to save the frontier from flaming war! 11

A Complete Novelet

RIDE INTO THE DESERT ..... **Jackson Cole** 80

Carrying the famed and priceless Ginewah Opal, Johnny Ellis makes his way through the wastelands—tracked by dangerous, traitorous foes!

Short Stories

HIGH HOPE HANDICAP ..... **L. Ernenwein** 62

Nothing could make Jimmy Reed of Broken Bow throw a race!

SHIFTLESS MAN ..... **Richard Brister** 73

Lazy Sam Anderson proves himself a ring-tailed whizzer

DEATH RIDES LOST MESA ..... **Harold F. Cruickshank** 94

Bill Shaw runs into the mystery of a sheriff's disappearance

and

THE BUNKHOUSE ..... **Foghorn Clancy** 6

A department conducted by America's foremost rodeo expert

Also See "Santa Barbara, California," Page 17, Portrait and Biography of John Charles Fremont, Page 27, and of Leland Stanford, Page 33

THE RIO KID WESTERN, published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., at 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Entire contents copyrighted, 1947, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscriptions $1.80 (12 issues); single copies, $.15; foreign and Canadian postage extra. Registered as second-class matter February 17, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any.

Read our companion magazines: Thrilling Western, Thrilling Ranch Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories, Thrilling Sports, Thrilling Love, Thrilling Mystery Novel, Thrilling Detective, Thrilling Football, Popular Western, Popular Detective, Popular Love, Popular Sports Magazine, Popular Football, Texas Rangers, G-Men Detective, West, Sky Fighters, Everyday Astrology, The Phantom Detective, Detective Novel Magazine, Masked Rider Western, Range Riders Western, Black Book Detective, Startling Stories, Popular Crossword Puzzles, Best Crossword Puzzles, Rodeo Romances, Exciting Love, Exciting Sports, and Exciting Western.

YOU MIGHT use a mechanic's micrometer or a draftsman's dividers, a surveyor's tape or an engineer's rule, but only with *training* can you hope to get the fullest measure of *opportunity*.

For opportunity is elastic—it expands along with your knowledge and ability. And whether you will "measure up" to the responsibilities of a successful future depends upon whether you are taking special training to qualify you for better positions along the way.

You can start now on a program of Personal Advancement—through training. The world-famous International Correspondence Schools are ready to help you in the same way that they have helped thousands of today's leaders in American business and industry.

Now is the time to broaden your opportunities and prepare for a rewarding future by study with I. C. S. Start today by mailing this coupon for complete information.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3966-J, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X:

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemistry Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Steam Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric ☐ Steam Engines

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

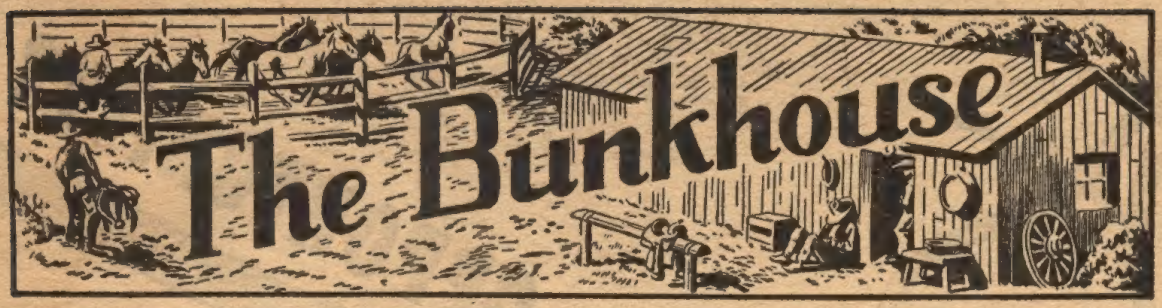
Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Illustrating ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Postal Service
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

*Name*_____ *Age*_____ *Home Address*_____

*City*_____ *State*_____ *Present Position*_____

*Working Hours*_____ *A.M. to*_____ *P.M.* **Length of Service in World War II**_____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Enrollment under the G.I. Bill of Rights approved for War II Veterans. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.



A Department for Readers Conducted by FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

GREETINGS, waddies, and welcome again to the Bunk House, where we always seem to have time to indulge in the telling of a few yarns about the old West, its heroes, gunmen, lawmen, outlaws and pioneers. They all combined to make the early West what it was, a gigantic stage upon which was played a thousand thrilling dramas.

A few months ago a big truck was driven to the Municipal Airport at Fort Worth, Texas, and from the truck were loaded into a DC-4 twenty calves that would average in weight more than 350 pounds. A few minutes after they were loaded into the plane the plane was in the air, its nose pointed northeast toward New York City, and by sundown that same day the calves had reached their destination. This was the first shipment by air of commercially-grown calves to market, as this shipment was consigned for beef to be served upon the tables of the big city.

Just after leaving the airport the plane crossed what was once the old Chisholm Trail, for that old trail at one time ran just about a mile and a half east of where the Fort Worth Municipal Airport is now located.

I am wondering what the oldtime trail drivers of seventy years ago, those fellows who drove thousands of head of longhorns up the Chisholm Trail to market, would have said if they had been told then that one day cattle would be transported by air a distance four times as great as their drives, which sometimes took months, just in a few hours.

Primitive Days

Those days were what might be called wild, raw, and primitive, when men had to make the best of such facilities as they had—and yet those oldtimers seemed to be as happy and enjoy life as much as the present generation.

It was just a few years previous to those trail-driving days that the cowboy came into being, and he has always been one of America's most unique characters. When one thinks of the privation and hardships that some of the early cowboys and cattlemen had as their lot, the tools of their trade that they fashioned out of the crudest materials, it seems as though they were a progressive but almost primitive group.

In the pioneer days, the cowboy depended upon his native wit and cleverness for much of his personal equipment. Next to his horse the rope was the most necessary tool of his trade. There were plenty of rawhides, in fact at the start of the cattle business almost the only value cattle had depended on their hides and tallow.

In those early days, time sometimes hung heavily upon the cowboy's hands, especially as he was perhaps alone for weeks or even months at some lonely line camp, and in such cases he found both employment and recreation in supplying the wants of his calling from the materials at hand.

Thus came rawhide reatas, hair ropes, wonderfully made bridle headstalls and hackamores of thin slivers of rawhide and leather, with long reins of the same materials covered with skilfully woven knots of colored horsehair.

Home Made Sombreros

It is said that the earliest home made sombrero was fashioned from a selected piece of rawhide, soft and plastic. This was pressed into a hole dug in the hard ground as near the exact size of the wearer's head as possible. Then the hide was rammed home with

(Continued on page 8)

THOUSANDS NOW PLAY

who never thought they could!

Thrilled by Playing

I've had my lessons just a week. I think your course is super. I am more thrilled than words can express when I found I could actually play America, The Merry Widow Waltz and the others.
*J. T., Mancelona, Mich.

Wouldn't Take $1000 for Course

The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course. *S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.

Shares Course With Sister

The teaching is so interesting and the pieces so beautiful I couldn't ask for anything better. I recommend your course highly. My sister shares it with me and feels the same way.
*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.

Finding New Joy

I am finding a new joy that I never experienced before, for I have always wanted to play, but had given up hope until I heard of your course.
*C. S. Lucien, Okla.

Plays After 2 Months

I hesitated before sending for your course because of an earlier experience I had with a course by ear from another company. I am playing pieces now I never dreamed I would play after only two months.
*E. T., Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

You, too, can play any instrument By this EASY A-B-C Method

YOU think it's difficult to learn music? That's what thousands of others have thought! Just like you, they long to play some instrument—the piano, violin, guitar, saxophone or other favorites. But they denied themselves the pleasure—because they thought it took months and years of tedious study to learn.

Learn in Spare Time at Home

And then they made an amazing discovery! They learned about a wonderful way to learn music at home—without a private teacher—without tedious study—and in a surprisingly short time. They wrote to the U. S. School of Music for the facts about this remarkable short-cut method. And the facts opened their eyes! They were amazed to find how easy it was to learn.

The result? Over 850,000 men and women have studied music at home this simple, A-B-C way. Now, all over the world, enthusiastic music-lovers are enjoying the thrilling satisfaction of creating their own music. They have found the key to good time, popularity and profit.

Costs only few cents a Day

And that's what **you** can do, right now. Get the proof that you, too, can learn to play your favorite instrument—quickly, easily, in spare time at home for only a few cents a day. Never mind if you have no musical knowledge, training or talent. Just read the fascinating booklet and Print and Picture sample that fully explain all about the famous U. S. School method. If interested tear out the coupon now, before you turn the page. U. S. School of Music, 2946 Brunswick Bldg. New York 10, N. Y. Largest school of its kind in the world. (49th year)

FREE!
Print and Picture Sample

NOTICE
Please don't confuse our method with any systems claiming to teach "without music" or "by ear". We teach you easily and quickly to play real music, any music, by standard notes . . . not by any trick or number system.

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC,
2946 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y.

I am interested in music study, particularly in the instrument checked below. Please send me your free illustrated booklet "How to Learn Music at Home," and your free Print and Picture Sample.

Piano	Saxophone	Clarinet	Practical Finger Control
Guitar	Trumpet, Cornet	Trombone	
Hawaiian Guitar	Reed Organ	Flute	Piccolo
Violin	Tenor Banjo	Modern Elementary Harmony	Mandolin
Piano Accordion	Ukulele		

Name..... Have you Instrument?.....
(Please print)

Address.....

City..... State.....

NOTE: If you are under 16 years of age, parent must sign coupon.

SAVE 2c—STICK COUPON ON PENNY POSTCARD

Make Your Decision for a
BETTER JOB or a
BUSINESS OF YOUR OWN

AIM high—pick one of these big fields. May never again be such opportunities to get in on ground floor and go up fast. REFRIGERATION & AIR CONDITIONING growing fast—frozen foods, commercial installations, many other developments. ELECTRICITY & INDUSTRIAL ELECTRONICS offers good pay to trained men. BODY & FENDER REBUILDING bringing many big money. AUTO MECHANICS in demand. DIESEL a rapidly expanding field. Pick one of these fields now—for men who ACT FAST things can happen fast. CONSULTATION AND PLACEMENT SERVICE whether you are interested in worthwhile job or setting up your own business. YOU CAN START TRAINING AT HOME IN SPARE TIME AND THEN COME TO BIG TRAINING SHOPS LATER. A few short weeks can make all the difference. VETERANS ENROLLED UNDER "G. I." BILL. COMMERCIAL TRADES INSTITUTE, a nationally known school, only civilian school selected by Army to train service men for refrigeration. FACTS FREE. MAIL COUPON TODAY. NO OBLIGATION.

FILL OUT—CUT OUT—MAIL TODAY

COMMERCIAL TRADES INSTITUTE, Dept. E 94
1400 W. Greenleaf, Chicago 26, Ill.
Send FREE illustrated Brochures and other information about the field I have checked below.
☐ Refrigeration and Air Conditioning ☐ Auto Mechanics
☐ Electricity & Industrial Electronics ☐ Diesel
☐ Body & Fender Rebuilding
Name .....
Address .....
City ..... State .....
☐ Veteran ☐ Non-Veteran

Amazing New KLIK-RITE
BALL PEN
GUARANTEED to Write for Years Without Refilling
Name in 23K Gold FREE
CLICK THE BUTTON

A real BALL PEN! Works and performs exactly like highest-priced pens—PLUS amazing new "click-it-to-write"... "click-it-to-park-it" feature—PLUS your name in 23K gold—all for only $2.98! Writes dry with waterproof ink—no blotter needed. Cannot leak. Writes anywhere ... even under water. One piece—no cap to fuss with or lose. Touch the button on top & ball point "clicks" out to write. Another touch and the point "clicks" back into the barrel. A slim streamlined beauty—lightweight ... COMPACT! Factory guaranteed.

Only $2.98

Send No Money!
Rush order today. PRINT NAME to be stamped in 23K Gold. Pay postman only $2.98 plus few cents postage on delivery. Or send $2.98 with order and save postage. If you are not delighted, return pen within 10 days for your money back. Order today!
KLIK-RITE PEN CO., Dept. D-71
215 W. Ontario Street, Chicago 10, Ill.

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD!
TRAIN FOR A FUTURE IN
DIESEL

● Prepare for the big earning power of **Diesel Trained Men.** Start learning at home, in spare time. UEI's easy, practical training covers all phases of DIESEL engine operation, fuel systems, auxiliary equipment, repairs and maintenance. When home course is completed, you come to Chicago for actual shop practice on DIESEL MOTORS under expert instructors, at UEI's fine, modern school.
BEGIN AT ONCE—GET ALL THE FACTS FREE. WRITE TODAY!
DIESEL DIVISION UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE
1314 Belden Avenue • Dept. 1007-D • Chicago 14, Illinois

THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 6)

the rounded end of a small tree trunk until it took the shape of the hole and incidentally the future wearer's head. Trimmed around with a sharp knife and adorned with a horsehair band and hat string, it made an excellent forerunner of the famous Stetsons of today.

Rawhide moccasins served for footwear and sometimes the cowboy made a kind of teepee or rawhide tent for shelter by lacing several rawhides together. The stockade corrals into which the cattle were driven for branding were often bound with green rawhide strands which, when dry, held like iron bands.

The building of a rawhide reata was not a thing to be undertaken hastily. It took time, skill, patience, and hard work. The usual length was between sixty and seventy-five feet. For such a rope the hides of young animals were selected. The number of hides required depended upon the length of the rope and the number of strands in the proposed rope.

Occasionally an expert rope maker used six strands, but to do so and still keep the rope around the maximum of three eighths of an inch in diameter, it was necessary to have each strand extremely thin and narrow. For this reason a four-strand rope was more usual.

Buckskin "Crackers"

Quite often the cowboy wove into the end of his rope a "cracker" of heavy buckskin. When driving cattle or horses it was quite the thing to drag thirty or forty feet of one's reata along behind the pony and with a quick forward jerk snap it with a loud crack at the heels of some animal in front, just as a bullwhacker handled his long whip.

Some men could use a reata in this way with amazing dexterity, fairly lifting out of his hide some sleepy horse or lazy steer droning along in the "drags." The end of the long snakelike rope touched him on the flank like a red-hot iron.

The wielders of rawhide ropes, however, had to be very careful with them, especially in wet weather. The rawhide, when wet, would become slick and could hardly be handled with any degree of accuracy, and great care had to be taken of them to insure good performance.

The trail herders or trail drivers, as they were mostly called, those cowboys who went up the trails with thousands of head of cattle to the markets, lived hard, were sometimes for months on the trail. For weeks they would not see anyone except those of the same crew of trail drivers. No liquor was within reach on those drives and most of the time they were too busy to indulge in the playing of poker.

Some people are of the opinion that each night around the campfire of any group of cowboys handling a herd of cattle, there were always card games, music and singing, but any oldtime trail driver will tell you that usually at night the men were too tired after a long day in the saddle to indulge in such amusement.

The drives on the trail usually started at daylight, and that meant that the cowboys must be up quite a while before daybreak in order to get their horses saddled and ready for the day's trip and to get their breakfast. It was a long hard grind, and often when the weather was threatening and there was danger of stampedes, all hands remained on watch all night with the herd. In any kind of weather, after the herd was bedded down for the night, certain numbers of the crew had to stand guard. These guards were usually changed every few hours so that all hands got at least some sleep.

How They Got the News

In case there was a visitor or visitors to the camp, then most of the hands sat up around the Chuck Wagon or campfire for some time after the evening meal, and listened to the visitors as they talked of things happening in some other part of the country. It was through such visits that the trail drivers learned the news, but many times the news was months old when it reached them.

Trail drivers had to be self-reliant. No man without courage had any business going up the trail with a herd. There were dangers of stampedes, of rustlers, of Indians, as the trail to the Northern market passed through the Indian Territory. But if a trail herd was well protected, if there was a large crew of well armed men with the herd and the boss was liberal in giving beef to the Indians through whose territory he drove the herd, the danger of trouble from the Indians was

(Continued on page 103)

NEW SECURITY PLAN PAYS HOSPITAL & DOCTOR BILLS . . .

Costs only 3¢ a day!

PROTECTS YOU IN CASE OF SICKNESS OR ACCIDENT

CASH BENEFITS INCLUDE

Hospital Room & Board Sickness or Accident Per Day Up to $6.00

Doctor Visits In Case of Accident Per Visit $3.00

Surgical Operations Up to $150.00

Time Lost from Work in Case of Accident Per Week $25.00

Accidental Death Up to $2000.00

Physical Disbursement. Up to $2000.00

INDIVIDUAL or FAMILY

Insure NOW, before it's too late! Protect your savings against Hospital expense. Here's an amazing offer of safe, dependable coverage under America's most popular Hospitalization Plan. Family or Individual eligible. No Medical Examination. When sickness or accident strikes, you may go to any Hospital in U. S. or Canada under any Doctor's care. YOUR EXPENSES WILL BE PAID exactly as Policy specifies. Many exceptional coverages included. The Company is under supervision of the Insurance Dept. No agents will call.

MAIL COUPON AT ONCE!

NORTH AMERICAN MUTUAL INSURANCE CO.
Dept. TG7-6, Wilmington, Del.

Please send me, without obligation, details about your "3c A Day Hospitalization Insurance Plan"

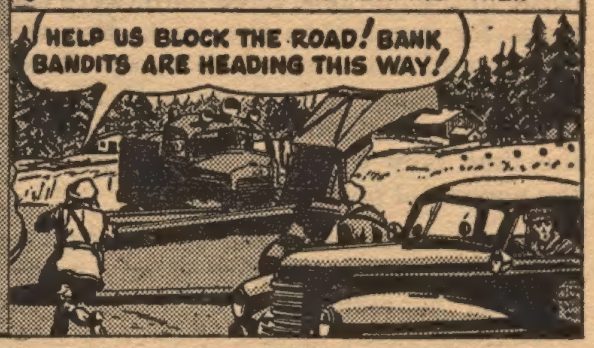
Name.....

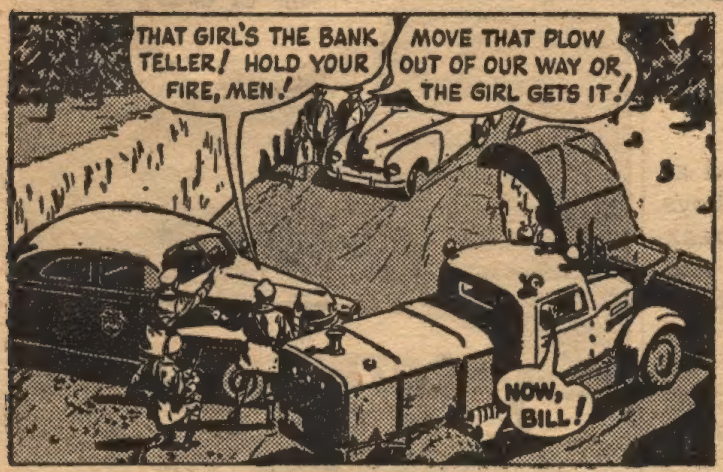
Address.....

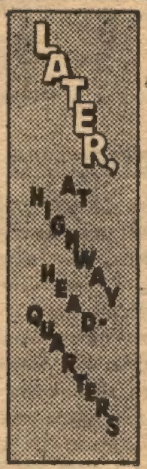
City.....*State*.....

Art's Quick Thinking Saved the Day When ...

AFTER A NIGHT-LONG FIGHT AGAINST HEAVY DRIFTS TO CLEAR SKYTOP HIGHWAY, ART AND BILL ARE HEADING THEIR POWERFUL ROTARY SNOWPLOW HOMEWARD WHEN..







A THOUSAND DOLLARS' REWARD! WHY, SIR...
THE LEAST OUR BANK CAN DO. MY NIECE HERE SAYS YOU SAVED HER LIFE
ISN'T HE HANDSOME!
A THIN GILLETTE SHAVE ALWAYS MAKES A HIT

MEN, FOR SMOOTH, REFRESHING SHAVES THAT MAKE YOU LOOK YOUR BEST, USE THIN GILLETTES ... THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. WHAT'S MORE, THIN GILLETTES ARE PRECISION MADE FOR YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR ... FIT EXACTLY. THUS YOU AVOID THE IRRITATION AND SCRAPE OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette BLADES
4 for 10¢

As a bullet plucked through the crown of Rakestraw's sombrero, the Rio Kid's hand plummeted to gun butt (CHAPTER X)

SILVER OF SATAN

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

At the behest of General Grant, the Rio Kid rides forth to recover a treasure hidden by traitors—and to stem a rising tide of rebellion that imperils national security!

CHAPTER I

Murder in Monterey

BEYOND the Embarcadero, Monterey Bay was glistening blue enamel under the April sun, its surface as smooth as furbished gunmetal in the dead calm. Within the embracing elbow of the breakwater which curved seaward from the Custom House, a steam packet had just dropped its mud hook. Its rakish funnel and square-rigged auxiliary masts were duplicated upside-down in the mirrored tidewater, as vivid as a marine painting.

In the doorway of a waterfront hotel's upper gallery, Cavalry Lieutenant C. E. Hickey of the local Presidio studied the newly-arrived steamer through Army

A COMPLETE BOB PRYOR NOVEL

glasses. She was a two-thousand-ton coaster sailing under Mexican registry.

Something akin to a shudder stirred the shoulder epaulets of the officer's dress tunic, as he focused his glasses on the nameplate on the vessel's stern counter:

KISMET
OF
ACAPULCO

Kismet! There was something symbolic in that name. Kismet—the Oriental word for fate. And this shabby Mexican tub was bringing destiny to the California seaport today, spelling climax to a tangled series of sinister events whose nature Lieutenant Hickey could only conjecture.

He withdrew from the balustraded *galleria* into the bedroom, so as not to be visible from the street. It would not do for hostile eyes to see a U.S. Army officer showing such keen interest in the arrival of a steam packet which plied regularly between Monterey and the Mexican port of Acapulco. Not on this particular voyage, at any rate.

Strange forces of destiny were weaving a complex pattern in Monterey today, of whose nature Lieutenant Hickey had but faint knowledge. He knew that this *sala* in the *Posada Republica* had been reserved, in strict secrecy, against the arrival from the north of one Captain Robert Pryor, better known outside California as the "Rio Kid."

He knew that as far back as Washington, D.C., President Ulysses S. Grant was personally interested in the arrival of the Mexican ship *Kismet*. He knew that somewhere back in the hills above Monterey, the Rio Kid probably was nearing the end of a desperate race against time, hoping to reach the Presidio before the *Kismet* made its landfall.

COLONEL JEFF WEATHERBY, in command of the Presidio garrison, had dispatched Lieutenant Hickey to Room Six of the *Posada Republica* that morning, with a secret message to deliver to Captain Pryor.

Seating himself beside an iron-grilled window which gave him a view of the harbor, the cavalryman saw that the *Kismet's* arrival had stirred Monterey's waterfront out of its spring-morning lethargy. Bum-boats and gigs were scuttling out to meet the ship, darting thither and yon like water bugs. A brass band was striking up the Mexican National Anthem, down on the quayside. Mexican workmen were busy festooning the *galleria* of the *Posada Republica* with gay bunting.

A footstep in the corridor outside Room Six made the young lieutenant start nervously. Automatically his hand reached to the brass-buttoned pocket of his tunic to make sure that Colonel Weatherby's message was safe there.

Breaking out in a cold sweat from nervous suspense, Lieutenant Hickey went to the door, opened it, and looked out into the hallway. He saw a frock-coated Americano, a gambler by the look of him, going from door to door, searching for the numeral indicating the room he sought.

That would not be the Rio Kid. The lieutenant closed the door.

Going back to the window, Hickey saw a gig put off toward shore from the *Kismet*. Through his glasses, the officer saw the ship captain's pennant and the Mexican flag fluttering from the stern staff of the gigboat.

"Senor Heraclio Furtado has arrived," Hickey muttered. "He certainly can't object to his welcome. Brass band and bunting, and every Mexican national in Monterey on the dock to greet him."

Why, he wondered, was the U. S. Army so vitally interested in the arrival on American shores of a petty emissary of the political party now in power in strife-torn Mexico? Senor Heraclio Furtado was no celebrity, by any stretch of the imagination. From what Hickey had read in the Monterey papers, the Mexican was arriving aboard the *Kismet* for the simple reason that the ocean-

going packet did not put in at the shallow harbor of Santa Barbara, further down the coast. That city was Furtado's actual destination.

Santa Barbara's annual Spanish fiesta was scheduled to take place the following week, and Senor Furtado was to be its guest of honor, representing the sister republic of Mexico, even now in the grip of near-revolution following the death of its first Presidente, Benito Juarez.

ant Hickey, the colonel's aide.

The brassy strains of Mexican band music wafted across the waterfront to assault Hickey's ears, as he watched the *Kismet's* boat make its landing. Petty local officials were on hand to greet Senor Furtado with as much fanfare and pomp as they were capable of bestowing upon a visiting dignitary.

Through his glasses, Hickey saw that the Mexican emissary was hardly an imposing figure. He was young and

BOB PRYOR

Solely as the result of a steamship's schedule, then, was Heraclio Furtado landing in Monterey. And yet President Grant was rushing Captain Pryor, who was the best scout in the country, who had scouted for Grant himself in the Civil War, to the California seaport. And out at the Presidio, Colonel Weatherby was awaiting the arrival of the *Kismet* with outward calm, but with an agitation which had not escaped Lieuten-

moon-faced, decked out in flashy velveteen and gold braid, sporting a jewel-hilted ceremonial sword and wearing a plumed hat which would have befitted a conquering Napoleon back from the wars.

A carriage drawn by the finest matched bays to be found in Monterey was waiting at the quayside. Senor Furtado and the skipper of the *Kismet* entered the equipage after much bowing

and handshaking. Apparently Furtado was not traveling with a retinue of attendants, for a lone American, wearing a pair of Dragoon six-guns and packing a rifle, climbed into the carriage with the Mexican dandy.

"Bodyguard," grunted Hickey, swinging his field-glasses to the majordomo of the brass band, who now was leading his musicians up the street past the historic Custom House. "You'd think from all the fuss and feathers Monterey is making that this two-bit Mexican had come to take over the governorship."

THE band was leading the rag-tag procession of Monterey civilians up the curving street toward the *Posada Republica*. Hickey had learned earlier in the day that Senor Furtado was expected to make a stop at the *posada* prior to boarding a stage-coach for Santa Barbara later in the evening.

The blare of music that was swiftly approaching prevented Lieutenant Hickey from hearing the faint squeak of hinges as the door leading into the corridor swung open behind him. A faint draft of cold air striking the nape of his neck caused the Army officer to lower his field-glasses and spin about.

He was in time to see the black-coated American gambler he had seen in the corridor closing the door behind him. The stranger had entered the room reserved for Captain Pryor without the formality of a knock, a breach of etiquette which took on a sinister implication in Lieutenant Hickey's eye.

Before he could demand an explanation, the stranger strode across the room, right arm lifting in a civilian's clumsy attempt at a military salute.

"Do I have the honor," asked the stranger, "of addressing Captain Robert Pryor of Texas?"

Hickey relaxed, his eyes studying the man briefly. He saw a pair of inscrutable gooseberry-green eyes, a hawkish face framed in thick Dundreary side whiskers of cinnamon hue, a black string tie fixed in place with a diamond horseshoe stickpin.

"Er—yeah." Hickey straightened, returning the salute. "I mean yes, sir."

Even as he spoke, Lieutenant Hickey did not know exactly why he had admitted to another man's identity. Young in the service, a shavetail but recently out of the West Point Academy, Hickey was flattered by this stranger's ignorance of the lone bar on his shoulder, pleased at having been mistaken for an officer of higher rank, especially a captain as famous as the Rio Kid. What he had said had been on the spur of the moment, without thinking.

"I have a message for you, Captain," the whiskered stranger said, reaching under the lapel of his Prince Albert. "A note of the utmost importance. I—"

The stranger broke off, his eyes bulging as he stared off through the window beyond the lieutenant.

"Gad, sir—look yonder!" he cried sharply, pointing seaward with his left arm. "That Mexican steamer—she's afire!"

Taken off guard, Lieutenant Hickey turned to stare out across the bay. It was the last sight he was to see this side of eternity.

The stranger's hand came out from under his fustian lapel. April sun rays glinted off the blade of a ground-down bayonet there. Even before Hickey's eyes could register that the *Kismet* was not on fire, that he had been tricked into turning his back on the mysterious visitor, the bayonet was driven to the hilt guard between his shoulders with one powerful thrust.

Without a moan, the cavalryman slumped to the floor. The frock-coated killer stooped, tugging the bayonet from between the dead man's ribs and wiped the blood from its razor-honed blade across Hickey's blue tunic.

The green-eyed American sheathed the weapon under his armpit. The band had halted outside the *posada* now, and smilingly Senor Heraclio Furtado had risen in the carriage to address a few words to his Mexican countrymen in the street throng who were acclaiming him with loud huzzas.

Stepping over Hickey's prostrate corpse, the red-whiskered killer tiptoed across the room. He paused with his hand on the doorknob, teeth glinting in a brief smile as he stared back at the dead man under the window.

"*Adios*, Captain Pryor!" he whispered, and then stepped out into the

Captain Pryor tripped gun-hammers and the slugs caught Caleb Rakestraw squarely in the chest (CHAPTER XV)

hallway and eased the door carefully shut.

CHAPTER II

Partners from Texas

THE westering sun had turned the crescent shores of Monterey Bay to a dazzling golden, blinding the eyes of the two oddly-contrasted horsemen who were crossing the Carmel hills along the inland trails which led to the fishing town.

With the tiled roofs and adobe walls of Monterey spread in panorama before them, the riders drew rein. Their gaze had been drawn at once to the steam packet which rode at anchor inside the breakwater.

"The *Kismet* beat us here, amigo," commented the taller rider, who wore the blue uniform of the U.S. Cavalry. "That may not set well with the commandante at the Presidio."

The speaker's companion, who wore the colorful garb of Old Mexico, obviously his native land, hipped over in saddle and stared at the anchored ship in moody resignation.

"*Quizás*—but eet ees not because we did not ride like the wind to reach Monterey first, General," pointed out the aristocratic-looking young Mexican. "After all, eet ees the long way from thos' Modoc Injun country to the sea."

It was plain that the appellation "General" was a nickname, applied to the blue-coated rider in a spirit of jest, for the twin bars of a Captain were on the tall rider's shoulder straps.

As a matter of fact, the tall, broad-shouldered Army man astride the leggy mouse-colored dun was none other than Captain Bob Pryor, who had made an enviable record as an officer of the Union forces in the Civil War. The young Mexican who rode beside him was his inseparable companion and partner in adventure, Celestino Mireles.

Two weeks ago they had reported for duty at Fort Klamath, up in Oregon Territory, where trouble with the Modoc Indians had prompted Army authorities to enlist the services of the Rio Kid.

But awaiting them at Fort Klamath had been an urgent code message from President U. S. Grant himself. Those orders had instructed Captain Bob Pryor to proceed without delay to Monterey, California, to arrive on or before April tenth. On that date the Mexican packet *Kismet* was due to make port and disembark one Senor Heraclio Furtado, a representative of the Mexican government. Pryor was to be on hand when the politico arrived.

Beyond the fact that the mission was of the utmost importance, overshadowing the urgency of the current campaign against the warring Modocs, Captain Pryor had no idea what awaited him here in Monterey. Pausing overnight in Sacramento to rest, he and his Mexican partner had pushed on down the San Joaquin valley. They had cut across the Coast Range by way of Pacheco Pass, in order to reach Monterey on the prescribed date.

And now, judging from the Mexican flag which floated from the forepeak of the ship now in the harbor, they had arrived too late by hours to witness Senor Heraclio Furtado's disembarkation.

"We're to report at a waterfront hotel instead of directly to the Presidio, Celestino," the Rio Kid commented, gathering up his reins. "Room Six, *El Posada Republica*, to be exact. We might as well get that part of it over with."

"*Si*," chuckled the young Mexican, touching the flanks of his midnight-black saddler with steel. "After serving under *soldados* like Custer and Sheridan, you shouldn't be afraid of thees colonel who runs the presidio, *no es verdad?*"

Pryor grinned, but made no answer. He made a commanding figure in the saddle as he gigged Saber, his veteran cavalry horse, down the slope toward the outskirts of Monterey.

The dust of a long and grueling trail lay thick on the wide brim of his campaign hat. The harsh lines of fatigue were evident on his rugged, sun-bronzed countenance, in the scarlet threads which laced the whites of his piercing blue eyes. Even so, the corners of his firm mouth were twisted in a good-hu-

mored grin above the strong outlines of his aggressive jaw.

He rode erect, his body firm and muscular from years of dangerous riding as well as his career as a cavalryman. A volunteer in the Union Army shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, Pryor hailed from Texas. His war years, where he served as a scout under the Generals Celestino had named, accounted for his blue uniform, the pantlegs of which were striped with the yellow insignia of the cavalry branch, and the dusty service boots which ordinarily bore the luster which military men maintain in their footgear as a point of pride.

The cessation of war had only sharpened Bob Pryor's restless nature, however. Returning to his parents' ranch on the Rio Grande, he had learned the stunning news that Border bandits had slain his mother and father and looted the home ranch.

The Rio Kid's unending warfare against the forces of lawlessness had stemmed from this tragedy of earlier years, but he had always held himself in readiness for any time when he should be recalled for Army duty, as now. Celestino had been saved from gruesome death at the hands of Border renegades by Pryor, thus starting a Damon and Pythias relationship which had been welded even closer by the dangers they had shared throughout the West in the years which had followed.

As they rode into the town of Monterey, Bob Pryor gestured over the waterfront settlement with his free arm.

"Yuh're lookin' at a historic place, Celestino," he said musingly. "One of yore forebears, Cabrillo, sailed his galleon into yonder bay as early as Fifteen-forty-two. Another ancestor of yores, Viscaino, named the town in honor of his *patrone* back in Sixteen-two. And Father Junipero Serra founded the mission here—the second California mission to be established—in Seventeen-seventy."

Celestino Mireles showed no surprise at his partner's modest display of erudition. The Rio Kid's knowledge of the country they traveled through stemmed from a good education, received before he had taken up his military career. Besides, the history of the West he loved had always appealed to him.

"*Si*, General," commented Celestino. "To see such a city makes me proud of being a Mexicano."

The Rio Kid grinned, bending a sidelong glance at his dashing partner. Celestino dressed in spectacular fashion which not even the alkali dust of a long trail could entirely obscure.

His ball-tasseled sombrero was pushed back on his head and held in place with a pleated chin-strap. A short embroidered *charro* jacket which was tied behind the cantle against the heat of the afternoon, matched the color of his tight velvet pants with their flared

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA

THE LOCALE OF THIS NOVEL

TO THIS day, Santa Barbara is essentially an "Early California" metropolis. Located on the Pacific Coast in the Santa Ynez foothills, it is generally considered to be the most scenic city in California.

Cabrillo first landed on its beach front in the 1500s, followed two hundred years later by Father Junipero Serra and his Franciscan priests who built Santa Barbara Mission at the time of the American Revolution. The beautiful old mission still stands, "queen" of the twenty-one California missions.

The Santa Barbara County Courthouse, an ornate structure built on Spanish lines, on the site of John C. Fremont's camp, has been called the most beautifully architectured civic building in America. All Santa Barbara street and place names are Spanish with the exception of its main thoroughfare, State Street. Most of its banks and other buildings are tiled and adobe-walled in keeping with the Early California motif. Every year, during August, the city sponsors a Spanish fiesta.

Painted Cave, featured in SILVER OF SATAN, is in the mountains ten miles north of Santa Barbara Its artifacts are now in a museum in Boston, Mass. Scientists have been unable to decipher the hieroglyphics painted on its ceiling and walls, but many believe it to be the prehistoric temple of Indian tribes lost when the Continent of Mu was submerged by the Pacific Ocean. Its paintings are still as vivid as they were when first discovered by Spanish explorers four hundred years ago.

bottoms. His gunbelt was buckled over a red sash which held a *cuchillo*, and his spike-heeled boots had been shopmade from the finest leathers at a *zapatero's* shop in Hermosillo.

"Monterey's latest history ain't so easy for a Mexicano to swallow," Pryor went on, in the Western drawl and idiom he had preferred to adopt. "This city was the capital of California durin' the Mexican regime. Then Commodore Sloat raised the Stars and Stripes over yonder Custom House in Forty-six, and durin' the Gold Rush the California Legislature sat in that big white buildin' yuh see across the plaza there—Colton Hall. Monterey has seen many a different flag fly over its roofs, Celestino."

The Mexican shrugged in the eloquent manner of his race.

"*Que diferencio?* Monterey is Americano now, and I am the Americano *tambien*, no?" Mireles' bantering tone altered, as he pointed up the street. "But there is our destination, General. The *Posada Republica*. And see! They have decked the hotel with *muchas* flags een our honor!"

Pryor grinned, eyeing the bunting which was draped over the rambling abode-walled *posada* ahead of them.

"Hardly for us," he commented, "since our arrival here is a strict military secret, Celestino. More likely the flags are in honor of this here Senor Furtado from Mexico."

They dismounted a block from the hotel and hitched their trail-weary horses to a rack in front of a *cantina*. They made their way afoot to the waterfront hostelry.

From the moment of entering the *posada's* crowded lobby, it was obvious that Monterey was in the grip of excitement. So far as Pryor was concerned, the jabbering throng inside the hotel was in his favor. No one paid him or Celestino Mireles the slightest attention as they headed upstairs toward the sleeping quarters of the *posada*.

Neither man was conspicuous. Dozens of Mexicans, clad in similar fashion to Celestino, were in the lobby throng, while the nearby Presidio accounted for hundreds of blue-clad American troopers in town.

A moment later the two new arrivals in the *Posada Republica* were standing before the door of Room Six, named in the message they had received at Fort Klamath as the room reserved for their use when they reached Monterey.

The door was unlocked. From force of habit, the Rio Kid hesitated for a moment while he adjusted the weight of holstered Peacemaker .45s at his thighs, and snugged down the extra pair he always carried concealed inside his shirt. Then he nodded for Celestino to open the door.

SUNLIGHT met their eyes, flashing off the conchas on Celestino's sombrero, flooding the whitewashed walls and ceiling of the *sala* with a vivid glare.

"Wait, Celestino!"

The Rio Kid flung out a hand to grab the Mexican's wrist, even as his partner started to cross the threshold.

A .45 was in Pryor's hand as he stared across the room at the grotesquely sprawled figure of a man in Army uniform, huddled in the patch of sunlight which penciled through the iron-grilled window directly opposite the doorway.

One look at the puddle of blood which had seeped from a stab-wound in the soldier's back was enough to tell the Rio Kid that Death had visited this room ahead of them.

Entering cautiously, the Kid made certain that no killer lurked inside. Celestino closed the door, staring somberly after his *compadre* as the Rio Kid walked swiftly over to the corpse and knelt down, rolling the dead man over on his back.

"A shavetail from the Presidio," Pryor guessed. "His body's still warm. He was knifed within the hour, Celestino."

A pair of field-glasses on the floor beside the corpse suggested that the officer had been viewing the bay from the window when his assassin had struck from behind.

The Rio Kid's deft fingers explored the officer's tunic. From an inside pocket he drew forth an envelope bearing the insignia of the Commandante's Headquarters, Presidio Monterey, United States Army. The envelope was addressed to Captain Robert Pryor.

"Whoever did this apparently vamosed without searching the body," the

Rio Kid commented, slitting open the envelope and unfolding the sheet of paper it contained.

He read it through twice, then handed it to Celestino without a word. The Mexican read:

Captain Pryor:

This will introduce Lt. C. E. Hickey of Company K, U.S.C., stationed at the Presidio here. I have dispatched my aide to await your arrival and to provide armed escort for you to my headquarters.

Before reporting to this command, you are ordered to ascertain the following facts, without revealing your identity in any way:

(1) The size of Senor Heraclio Furtado's personal retinue, if any, and the extent to which they are armed.

(2) The exact time at which Senor Furtado intends to leave Monterey for his destination in Santa Barbara.

(3) The exact route by which Senor Furtado and his party intend to travel to Santa Barbara.

Upon learning these facts, you are to report immediately to my headquarters at the Presidio where we will acquaint you with the reasons for your mission here, and you will receive orders as to your future activities in that connection.

I cannot overstress the importance of your remaining incognito, as certain elements will undoubtedly make an attempt on your life if they know you have come to Monterey in connection with Senor Heraclio Furtado's visit here.

Be assured that this is a matter of the supremest importance to national security. Destroy this message before accompanying Lt. Hickey to the Presidio.

JEFFERSON WEATHERBY,
Colonel U.S. Cavalry,
Commanding Officer.

A bead of sweat trickled from Celestino's brown cheek as he finished reading the message. Although the hotel room was stiflingly hot, both men felt a chill coast down their spines as they stared at the dead face of Lieutenant Hickey.

"It appears that our intended arrival has leaked out, somehow, for all the secrecy attending it," Pryor said gravely. "Whoever killed this lieutenant probably mistook Hickey for me. Must have known that this *sala* had been reserved for me."

Celestino drew a blanket from one of the beds and draped it reverently over the young officer's corpse. He waggled his head somberly as Bob Pryor touched a match to Colonel Weatherby's letter and watched it burn to ash in the corner fireplace.

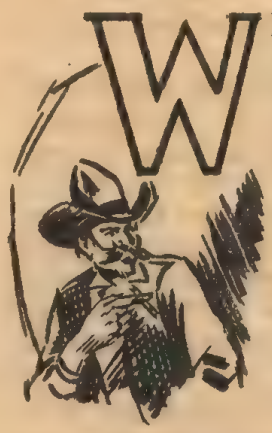
"Eet ees *muy malo,* General," the Mexican agreed. "What do we do next?"

The Rio Kid jacked open his six-guns and inspected the loads carefully before restoring the Colts to their holsters.

"We'll scout up this information the Colonel wants about Senor Furtado," he said grimly, "and then I'll take a *pasear* over to the Presidio and report. Somethin' tells me we're workin' on a mighty important case, Celestino. One we may not live to finish, if we don't find out pronto who's fightin' us and how they managed to get hold of confidential military information."

CHAPTER III

Fremont and Stanford



WHEN the Rio Kid presented his credentials to the soldier on guard at the gates of the Monterey Presidio, the sun was only an hour above the Pacific horizon. He received directions on how to reach the commanding officer's headquarters.

Obtaining information regarding Senor Heraclio Furtado's plans had been surprisingly simple. Some adroit questioning of the people at random in the crowd downstairs in the *posada* lobby had sufficed.

The Mexican emissary, it appeared, was resting from his sea voyage in his private suite in the *Posada Republica,* since he was scheduled to depart for the south aboard a specially chartered stagecoach shortly before midnight. He would be accompanied, according to statements made in Captain Pryor's hearing by a Monterey newspaper man who had been permitted an interview with the Mexican dignitary, by one Erasmus Randeen, an American who served as Senor Furtado's orderly and personal bodyguard.

Other than that, all that Pryor discovered was that Senor Furtado was a minor state official from Mexico City,

who would represent the southern republic at Santa Barbara's forthcoming Spanish Fiesta celebration. The Rio Kid could learn nothing about Furtado himself, or of his Mexican background, political or otherwise.

Long experience as an Army man had trained the Rio Kid to curb any personal curiosity as to missions on which he was assigned. But he realized the fact that President Grant himself was interested in the visiting Mexican, plus the secretive nature of Colonel Weatherby's letter, was proof that Senor Furtado must be visiting America on some mission considered dangerous to the United States Government.

The Rio Kid reined his dun cavalry horse in front of the Presidio headquarters building, returning the salute from a corporal who stepped forward to take the reins. Saber, the temperamental dun, would allow this, since the corporal was in uniform.

Celestino had remained in Monterey, to stand guard over Lieutenant Hickey's body and to take care of any persons who might attempt to invade Room Six. It was imperative that none of the hotel staff should learn of the murder which had been committed in the hotel that afternoon until the news had been passed on to Colonel Weatherby.

Entering the outer office, the Rio Kid removed his campaign hat and approached a desk where a sergeant was on duty.

"At ease," the Rio Kid said, and grinned as the sergeant jumped to attention. "Please report to yore Commandante that Captain Robert Pryor is reportin' for special duty."

A nameplate on the desk identified the soldier as one Sergeant Zero Malotte. Instead of answering with a salute and a brisk "Yes, sir!" Malotte clutched the edge of his desk and stared at Pryor, his jaw unhinged in a mingled expression of astonishment and dismay.

"I—I didn't get the name, sir."

Sergeant Malotte's voice was like a caw from a broken horn. Beadlets of perspiration had broken across the soldier's pock-marked face, although a cool sea breeze off the bay was blowing through the orderly room.

"Pryor," repeated the Rio Kid. "Captain Robert Pryor. The Commandante is expecting me, Sergeant."

Malotte gulped twice, mopping a sleeve across his face before making a perfunctory salute. The Rio Kid thought he saw a glinting malice leap into the sergeant's eyes, then disappear.

"Is—is Lieutenant Hickey with you, sir?" Malotte asked.

The Rio Kid shook his head, a scowl gathering between his brows as he returned Malotte's bulging stare.

"I am alone, Sergeant," he said stiffly. "I don't know any officer named Hickey."

Zero Malotte licked his thin lips with a dry tongue, executed an about-face and strode across the orderly room to vanish inside a door marked "Commanding Officer".

He emerged a moment later, flashing a servile grin at the waiting scout.

"Colonel Weatherby will see you at once, sir," he said, showing no trace now of his previous agitation. "He—er—sent Lieutenant Hickey into town to escort you here, sir. The lieutenant must have missed connections. The colonel's apologies, Captain Pryor."

The Rio Kid brushed past the desk sergeant and entered Colonel Weatherby's private office.

THE Commandante was a hard-bitten officer of the old school, his face scarred with the marks of past campaigns, his eyes boring into the Rio Kid's face like twin gimlets as the two men exchanged salutes.

"Captain Robert Pryor reportin' for special duty, Colonel."

Weatherby stood up, a towering man who matched the Rio Kid's own impressive height. Gray and growing bald at sixty, the old war-dog impressed Pryor as a man who demanded unswerving loyalty from his command, a rock-hard disciplinarian, and undoubtedly a master strategist or he would not be holding down one of the most vital commands on the Pacific Coast.

"I have two distinguished gentlemen here I wish to introduce, Captain," Colonel Weatherby said brusquely. "Ex-Senator Leland Stanford of California, and a soldier of whom you doubtless

have heard—the former Major General of volunteers in the Union Army, John Charles Fremont."

Two gentlemen in mufti stepped forward, extending their hands to the Rio Kid in turn.

"Governor Stanford and I have met before," the Rio Kid said, undismayed in the presence of one of the West's foremost empire-builders and statesmen. "I had the honor of bein' at Promontory Point when yuh drove the golden spike which commemorated the junction of the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific railroads, suh."

Leland Stanford's keen gray eyes lighted with recognition as he shook the famous scout's hand.

"It is indeed a pleasure to renew your acquaintance, Captain Pryor," he said gravely.

In the presence of Fremont, the Rio Kid was conscious of a quickening of the pulse. Here was an explorer and soldier who had made history, a man responsible for the conquest of California in earlier days, a general of no mean reputation in the Civil War, a statesman who had narrowly missed election to the highest office in the land during the Buchanan campaign. Not yet past the prime of life, John Charles Fremont, the Rio Kid was prophetically certain, was destined to write his name in even bolder characters across the annals of a young and vigorous nation.

"Indeed I have heard of General Fremont." The Rio Kid smiled. "I was servin' under Sheridan when you were makin' yore brilliant campaigns in the war, suh. And yore part in the history of California is equaled only by that of Mr. Stanford."

Introductions over with, and amenities acknowledged, Colonel Weatherby waved the Rio Kid into a chair. He at once came to the point with a directness which was part and parcel of an old soldier's make-up.

"Lieutenant Hickey delivered my message, Captain?" he asked.

The Rio Kid glanced from Fremont to Stanford and back to the Commandante, his eyes questioning.

"You may talk freely," Weatherby said quickly, interpreting his reticence to speak in the presence of civilians.

CELESTINO MIRELES

"We are all here in the same interests, Captain."

The Rio Kid cleared his throat and spoke reluctantly.

"Lieutenant Hickey has been murdered, sir. He was stabbed in the back before I reached Room Six this afternoon."

Fremont and Stanford gasped in shocked dismay. Except for a whitening of his clenched knuckles, Colonel Weatherby seemed unaffected by the stunning news.

"My aide's death means but one thing, gentlemen," the Colonel said huskily. "There is a leak of information somewhere in the picture—a spy close to these headquarters, as a matter of fact. Pryor's coming to Monterey was kept a strict secret. A military secret."

The Rio Kid's mind flashed to the desk sergeant in the outer room, and his lips parted to tell of a hastily-formed hunch. Then he thought better of it and clamped his teeth on the impulse. He must learn more before making accusations. He had nothing more to go on than Malotte's peculiar actions.

"You are doubtless curious as to the reason why President Grant shifted you here from your Modoc assignment, Captain," the Colonel said, after a pause. "I shall endeavor to be brief. Frankly, the future peace between the United

States and Mexico is at stake. The fact of Lieutenant Hickey's murder today should convince you that we are combatting sinister forces of evil."

Pryor nodded gravely, settling back in his chair to listen.

PACING the floor behind his desk, Colonel Weatherby launched into his narrative without preliminaries.

"Back in the closing years of the Civil War," he said, "a large consignment of silver from the Comstock Lode in Nevada was purchased by the Government from one of Mr. Stanford's mines, known as the Satan Stope. Perhaps you have heard of the so-called 'Silver of Satan' and what happened to it, Captain?"

"Yes sir," the Rio Kid answered. "I understand the silver was to have been shipped East to help finance the Union cause. Bandits intercepted the Silver of Satan."

Colonel Weatherby nodded gravely.

"Correct," he said. "Now, after all these years, Army Intelligence has dug up a few facts concerning that robbery. It has been established that the bandits who held up the mule train and massacred the Union troopers who guarded it were not mere desperadoes, as was at first thought, but were working for the Confederacy.

"The Silver of Satan was smuggled down here to Monterey and put aboard a schooner owned by one Captain Caleb Rakestraw. Rakestraw was little more than a freebooter, a pirate. But he had Secessionist tendencies and he had contracted to run the stolen silver around the Horn in his schooner, the *Dixie Queen*, so it was entrusted to him."

Weatherby paused to pick up a dossier of secret papers.

"Captain Rakestraw was commissioned to get the cargo of silver through the Union blockade and land it at Savannah," the Commandante went on, refreshing his memory from the confidential notes in his file. "However, California was a Union State and we managed to send a Federal gunboat in pursuit of the *Dixie Queen*. In his attempt to shake off the gunboat, Captain Rakestraw ran his ship aground on the coast near Santa Barbara, as a result of a heavy inshore fog.

"When the fog cleared next morning, the Union gunboat came alongside the wreck of the *Dixie Queen* on the flood tide and sent a boarding party to the stranded schooner. But Captain Rakestraw and his crew had abandoned the ship—and no trace of its cargo was ever found. The *Dixie Queen* was broken up by winter storms, but no sign of the Silver of Satan came to light."

Leland Stanford spoke up as Colonel Weatherby paused in his narration.

"Shortly afterward the Civil War came to an end," the millionaire railroad-builder explained. "Since I had sold the silver to the Union government, I spent a young fortune trying to trace it. All I ever found out were unconfirmed rumors that Captain Rakestraw had taken the Silver of Satan ashore during the night and cached it somewhere in the Santa Ynez Mountains in the vicinity of San Marcos Pass, near Santa Barbara. But further investigation proved futile. The treasure had disappeared as if it had been wiped off the face of the earth."

Colonel Weatherby went to a huge safety vault in an adjoining room and brought out a file of papers bordered in red, indicating that the Army classified them as "Top Secret."

"And now to bring this case up-to-date," the Presidio Commander said. "Intelligence men—spies, if you will—working in Mexico City have notified President Grant that a rebel chieftain of Portuguese blood, Cabral Goularte by name, is seeking to overthrow the Mexican government and set up a régime hostile to the United States. It seems that Goularte's faction has learned the whereabouts of Captain Caleb Rakestraw and the missing silver cache!"

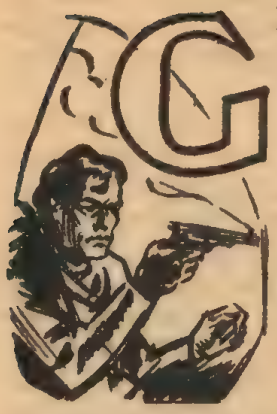
"If all this comes from Army Intelligence," the Rio Kid said, "there can be no doubt of its authenticity."

"You are exactly right there," said the colonel. "I imagine this has been counter-checked. I would trust our own undercover men beyond the reports turned in by cattlemen and mining men. The Army has worked thoroughly on this case."

"Please continue, Colonel," the Rio Kid said. "There must be more."

CHAPTER IV

Undercover Plans



GROWING interest was in the Rio Kid's eyes as Weatherby divulged the information contained in the secret files.

It appeared that Caleb Rakestraw had changed his name and was living incognito in Santa Barbara, biding his time to strike back at the United States which he had never forgiven for his loss of the *Dixie Queen*. Now appeared to be his chance, for the Mexican *rebelistas* were in dire need of the Silver of Satan to buy arms and cannon.

"Here's where Senor Heraclio Furtado enters the situation," Weatherby explained. "He is going to Santa Barbara ostensibly as a guest of honor at that city's annual Spanish fiesta. In reality, our secret agents believe he plans to meet Caleb Rakestraw, the Confederate seaman, during his visit, and arrange to smuggle the Silver of Satan into Mexico."

General Fremont regarded the Rio Kid gravely.

"You see what the Colonel is driving at, Captain," Fremont said. "Possession of this silver by rebel forces might mean the overthrow of the Mexican government and force this country into war with our sister republic south of the Border. Not only that, but Senator Stanford here is willing to buy the silver back at a premium. He considers that a patriotic duty, as great a purpose as his philanthropical one in endowing a university he plans to found at Palo Alto."

A corporal came into the room to light the ceiling lamps, dusk having fallen during the colonel's narrative. When the orderly had withdrawn, Weatherby returned the secret papers to the vault and came back to his desk.

"There is the background of this case, Captain Pryor," the old warrior said gruffly. "Your job will be to shadow this Senor Furtado down to Santa Barbara and prevent this deal from going through with the Mexican *rebelistas*. More than the Silver of Satan is at stake. On the success of your mission depends whether this generation will face another bloody war!"

The Rio Kid remained in the Commandante's office after Leland Stanford and John Charles Fremont had made their departure. As Fremont shook hands with the Kid, he said earnestly:

"As you probably know, Captain Pryor, I had the honor of leading the expetion which captured Santa Barbara from the Mexicans in Forty-six. I am thoroughly familiar with the mountain terrain in that locality—wild country where the Silver of Satan is supposed to have been hidden. If I can give you any information of value, please call on me at the Carmelo Hotel."

When the two celebrities had left, Colonel Weatherby turned a worried glance in the Rio Kid's direction.

"Hickey's murder is a great shock to me, Pryor," he admitted. "Especially since it proves that some spy close to my office has tipped off our enemies regarding your arrival here."

The Rio Kid jerked his head toward the orderly room door.

"When I gave my name to yore sergeant-at-arms outside, Colonel," he said, "Malotte acted like he was seein' a ghost. Are yuh certain of Sergeant Malotte's loyalty, sir?"

Weatherby tugged his lower lip thoughtfully.

"Malotte has been at the Presidio for two years," he said slowly. "During the War between the States, he served with the rebs under John Hood. So far as I know he has no further interest in the Lost Cause. I assigned him to his present job because he was familiar with Army paper work."

The Rio Kid leaned forward intently.

"Does Sergeant Malotte have access to yore files?" he asked. "Would he have known by any chance that I was arrivin' from Fort Klamath today?"

Weatherby's bushy brows gathered in a scowl. Reaching to the wall, he jerked a rope to sound a bell in the outer office. In response to his signal, the corporal who had lighted their lamps entered the

room, came to attention and saluted.

"Send Sergeant Malotte in, Corporal Diskin."

The orderly shook his head.

"I'm sorry, sir. Sergeant Malotte is off duty. Shall I fetch him from the barracks, sir?"

"Yes. On the double, Corporal. Tell the sergeant it is urgent."

During the corporal's absence, the Rio Kid reported in full all the information he had been able to glean concerning Senor Heraclio Furtado's plans to leave Monterey around midnight on a special stage-coach bound for Santa Barbara.

BY THE time he had finished Corporal Diskin was back.

"Sir," he reported, after saluting, "Sergeant Malotte is not in quarters. He has left the post on pass, sir. I imagine you would find him down at the Bear Flag Saloon, sir. That's where he hangs out when he is off duty."

Colonel Weatherby's scowl deepened. Then he jerked his attention to sterner business.

"Corporal," he said soberly, "I regret to say that Lieutenant Hickey has been stabbed to death over in the *Posada Republica.* You will take a squad of men to Monterey with Captain Pryor and bring back his body."

The corporal paled as he saluted and withdrew.

A half-hour later, the Rio Kid was reining up at a stable across the plaza from the *Posada Republica.* With him were Corporal Walter Diskin and a squad of mounted troopers from the Presidio.

"Carry the Lieutenant's body out the back way, men," the Rio Kid ordered. "Yuh'll find him in Room Six, with a young Mexican on guard—a friend of mine. Try to work as inconspicuously as possible."

The squad of cavalrymen headed for the alley which flanked the waterfront hotel, while the Rio Kid and Corporal Diskin made their way along the street toward the bunting-hung arcades of the main entrance.

Passing the lighted windows of the Bear Flag Saloon, the Rio Kid suddenly halted, gripping the corporal's sleeve.

"Ain't that Sergeant Malotte at the table just inside the window yonder?" he whispered.

Corporal Diskin nodded. Zero Malotte, in uniform, was sharing a bottle of whisky with a frock-coated American with cinnamon-red Dundreary whiskers.

"That's Malotte, all right," Diskin confirmed. "The man he's talking to is a tinhorn named Jule Fesster who runs the roulette layout for the Bear Flag. Shall I get the sergeant for you, sir?"

The Rio Kid shook his head thoughtfully, moving closer to the saloon window to put himself out of sight of Zero Malotte and in a position where he could memorize Jule Fesster's appearance for possible future use. He saw that the gambler's close-set eyes were of a peculiar gooseberry-green hue, and that he sported a diamond horseshoe stickpin in his black cravat. He looked the part of the tinhorn Corporal Diskin had called him.

"No—Sergeant Malotte can wait," the Rio Kid decided. "Stick with me, Corporal, for the time bein'. Mebbe I'll want to send a message back to Colonel Weatherby tonight."

Entering the gaily-lighted lobby of the *Posada Republica,* Captain Pryor halted as he stared into the crowded dining room of the hotel. Seated at a lavishly appointed table in the middle of the room was a sleek-haired young Mexican across whose chest was the scarlet sash of a visiting diplomat.

"That'll be Senor Heraclio Furtado, I reckon," Pryor surmised. His gaze shifted to the rawboned, black-mustached American who was dining with the Mexican dignitary. "And his bodyguard, Erasmus Randeen."

The Rio Kid staded at Furtado with more than passing interest. At first glance he had almost mistaken the Mexican guest for his own partner, Celestino Mireles, so alike were the two in build and coloring. Their faces were not so alike though, for where Celestino's was hawklike, Furtado's was round. It was difficult to realize that this young emissary, chatting animatedly with a group of obsequious waiters, could be a vital link in a plot to overthrow the existing régime in Mexico.

Going on upstairs, the Rio Kid was in

time to see the Presidio troopers carrying the stiffening corpse of Lieutenant Hickey down the corridor. They headed out of the hotel by way of an outdoor stairway leading into a dark alley.

Bidding Corporal Diskin to go downstairs and wait for him, the Rio Kid went into Room Six where Celestino Mireles was awaiting his return. Celestino had nothing of interest to report. But he had worked up an interest of his own.

"*Caramba,* General!" he chuckled. "Have you seen thees Senor Heraclio Furtado? What I would not give for the scarlet *gaucho* pants he wears! And that jeweled sword. *Madre mia,* what a dashing *caballero* he ees, no?"

IN that moment, the Rio Kid's fertile brain ironed out the last details of a daring scheme which had occurred to him only a few minutes before.

"Celestino," he said to his smiling *compadre,* "this will come as a surprise to yuh. But yuh're goin' to wear Senor Furtado's gaudy costume and swing his jeweled sword at yore waist. How does that strike yuh?"

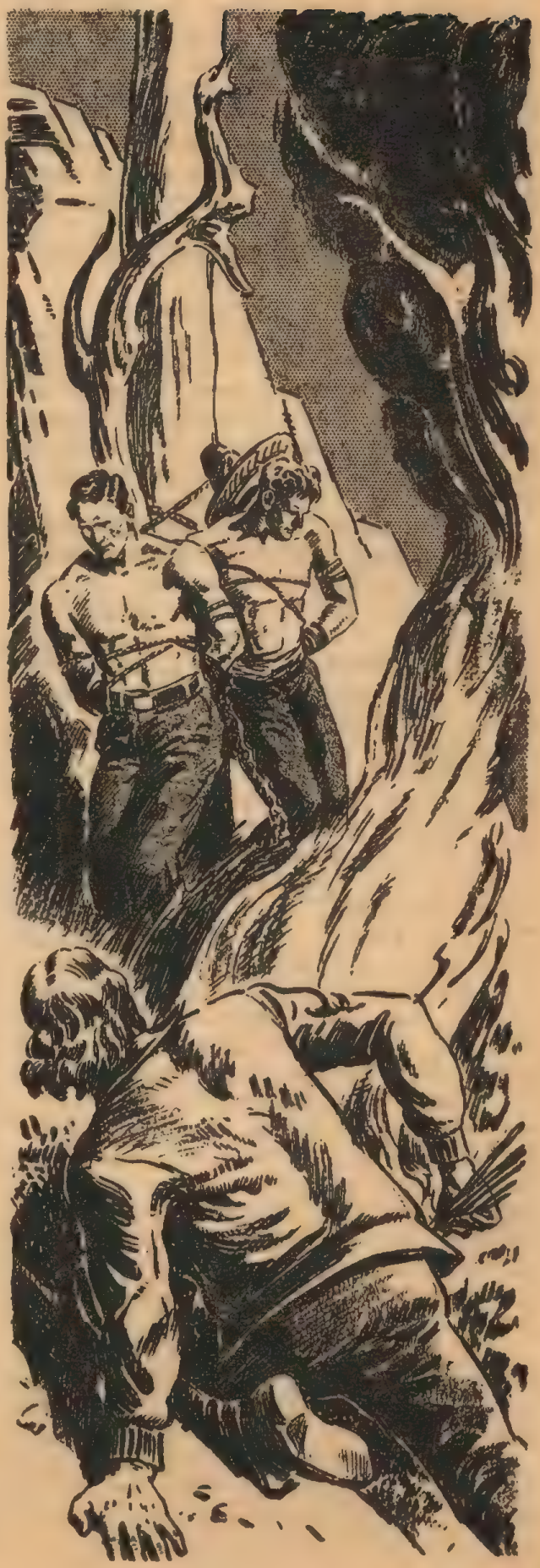
Mireles' black eyes widened in astonishment.

"You are jesting weeth me, General?" he demanded.

"I was never more serious in my life. Sit down. I've got a lot to tell yuh. Have yuh ever heard of the Silver of Satan?"

Celestino shook his head, and Bob Pryor embarked on a detailed story of the lost treasure. For the better part of an hour, the Rio Kid went over plans with the eager Mexican, giving him the full picture of the missing silver cache of Captain Caleb Rakestraw and the subsequent details which the U.S. Army Intelligence men had dug up regarding Senor Heraclio Furtado's designs on the precious metal which never reached the Union Army.

"Furtado's stage-coach leaves Monterey tonight," the Rio Kid concluded. "We must ride southward ahead of that stage. Eat a good supper tonight, Celestino. We won't have any breakfast this side of the Soledad Mission."



Rakestraw lighted the dry mesquite and the flames spread rapidly (CHAPTER XI)

Celestino accompanied the Rio Kid downstairs, his face grave as he pondered the rôle he was to play in the forthcoming drama. For if the Rio Kid's plans materialized, Celestino Mireles would arrive in Santa Barbara before the end of the week posing as the visiting emissary from Mexico, Heraclio Furtado!

"You are eat weeth me, General?" Celestino asked.

The Rio Kid shook his head.

"I've got a heap to do before we leave Monterey," he said. "I'll meet yuh in Room Six at eleven o'clock. Meanwhile, watch Senor Furtado as close as yuh can. Study his mannerisms, his gestures, the way he talks. Memorize 'em, so yuh'll be a good actor. *Hasta luego.*"

Leaving Celestino, the Rio Kid went into the small cubbyhole off the lobby which served as a writing room. There, he penned a brief message to Colonel Weatherby at the Presidio, requesting him to dispatch a courier to San Luis Obispo as soon as possible, to make certain arrangements which were vital to the success of the Rio Kid's plans.

Sealing the message in an envelope bearing the *Posada Republica's* crest, the Rio Kid went into the lobby and sought out Corporal Diskin.

"Take this letter to the Commandante, Corporal," the Kid instructed. "Tell him I won't have time to visit the Presidio again. He'll understand."

"Yes, Captain Pryor." Diskin saluted.

"One last favor, Corporal," the Rio Kid said. "I'd appreciate it if yuh could tell me how to get to the Carmelo Hotel."

"That is not difficult," said Diskin, and gave the directions briefly. Then he asked, "Is this message to the Commandante of great importance."

"I would not have sealed it, if it were not," the Rio Kid pointed out. "We have embarked on a serious mission here. All our duties are important. Need I remind you, Corporal?"

"No, Captain. But I don't pay much attention to wild rumors, and I have heard that big things are about to happen. That is the reason I asked you."

The Rio Kid scowled. "Be sure you don't let anything slip, yourself. And the best way to scotch a rumor, is just to laugh it off."

CHAPTER V

Guns at Gaviota Pass

ONLY ten minutes after Corporal Diskin had left for the Presidio, the Rio Kid was closeted in private conference at the Carmelo Hotel with its most distinguished guest, General J. C. Fremont.

Though three decades had elapsed since Fremont had led American forces over San Marcos Pass to capture Santa Barbara in the name of the Stars and Stripes, Fremont's memory of the surrounding mountains was extraordinarily acute.

With the help of maps and Fremont's personal sketches, the Rio Kid formed a clear mental picture of the lay of the land around Santa Barbara. He paid especial attention to the gap in the Santa Ynez Range where the renowned El Camino Real, or King's Highway, led from San Franciso to San Diego.

"Gaviota Pass will be the spot for you to pick to carry out your scheme, Captain," Fremont insisted. "The El Camino Real runs between high cliffs at that point, a narrow spot where the defenders of Santa Barbara nearly ambushed me and my troops back in the Forties. Senor Furtado's stage-coach will scrape its sides on the narrow cliffs there. It will be ideal for your purpose."

The Rio Kid picked up his campaign hat and prepared to leave, noting by the clock on the wall of Fremont's suite that it was half-past ten.

"Thank yuh, General," he told Fremont. "If Furtado's plot to smuggle the Silver of Satan comes to nothin' it will mostly be due to the information yuh've given me. Good night, suh."

Riding back to the waterfront, the Rio Kid downed a hasty meal at a Mexican tortilla house. Then he went back to the *posada,* and kept his eleven o'clock rendezvous with Celestino Mireles with less than a minute to spare. They hurried down the stairs, to head for where they had left their horses.

JOHN CHARLES FREMONT

FEW Americans have lived lives more packed with achievement and adventure than John Charles Fremont, soldier, explorer and statesman, born in Savannah in 1813. He attended Charleston College, and in 1833 was assigned to the U. S. Sloop of War *Natchez* as a mathematics instructor on a cruise to South America. On his return he took up civil engineering and made surveys for railroads and the Cherokee Indian lands in Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee.

In 1838 he led the first of his famous expeditions up the Missouri River, for which he was commissioned a second lieutenant, U.S. Army Topographical Corps. In 1842 he explored the then unknown Rocky Mountains, revealing the existence of the South Pass, and picking sites for Army forts. The following year he explored Salt Lake, the Snake River, the Columbia, the little known wilderness of California and had trekked nearly 4,000 miles when he returned to St. Louis in '44.

Commissioned a captain, Fremont led an expedition into California, just before the outbreak of the Mexican War. He proclaimed the Republic of California at Sonoma and ran up the "Bear Flag." He was in charge of the occupation army while Commodores Stockton and Sloat seized Monterey and ran up the Stars and Stripes. Shortly after Mexico ceded California to the U. S., Fremont was court-martialed for insubordination against General Kearney and dismissed from the service. President Polk remitted the sentence, but Fremont resigned in disgust and turned back to surveying.

He ran for president in 1856 but lost to Buchanan due to his anti-slavery tendencies. During the Civil War he was a major general of volunteers but after quarrels with superior officers, left the Army once more. One of the most colorful figures the Wild West ever knew, he was governor of Arizona from 1879 to 1881, and in 1890 was retired with a permanent rank of Major General. He died that same year in New York, of ptomaine poisoning.

As they left the *Posada Republica*, they saw a red and yellow stage-coach drawn up in front of the hostelry, its sides decorated with Mexican and American flags.

"Senor Furtado is about to leave for Santa Barbara," Captain Pryor commented. "I'm glad he figgered he had to have a special stage. It means we'll have only Furtado and his bodyguard to han-

dle, and no other passengers to worry about."

Riding past the Bear Flag Saloon a few moments later on Saber, the dun mount, the Rio Kid saw from the corner of his eye that his departure with Celestino Mireles was being watched by the tall, smallpox-scarred sergeant from the Presidio, Zero Malotte. Standing on the saloon porch beside Weatherby's sergeant-at-arms was the frock-coated gambler with the red Dundreary whiskers, Jule Fesster.

Soon the twinkling lights of the harbor city lay behind Celestino and the Rio Kid, as they headed south along the El Camino Real which led down the coast to Santa Barbara. The night hid the fact that two other riders followed that same highway of destiny—Zero Malotte and Jule Fesster the gambler. . . .

Southern California was decked out in her most gorgeous springtime robes when Senor Heraclio Furtado's stage-coach entered Lompoc Valley and headed into the Santa Ynez.

In the vicinity of La Purisima Mission, founded by the Franciscan friars nearly a century before, the valley resembled a golden altar cloth, its meadows aflame with golden California poppies as far as the eye could reach.

Furtado, bored and road-weary, bounced on the leather cushions in the rear of the Concord, his eyes paying scant attention to the grandeur of the semi-tropical scenery outside.

Just over the purple horizon now, Santa Barbara waited on the coastal plain like a jewel in a tiffany of peaks and seashore. Furtado had endured much in traveling this far. He had known the tortures of *mal de mer* during the wearisome three-weeks' voyage of the *Kismet,* plodding up the continent from Acapulco to Monterey. Equally rough had been the four-day trek down the El Camino Real, with overnight stops at remote inns where landlords had charged outrageous prices for food and lodging.

But Senor Heraclio Furtado was playing for high stakes. No cost or discomfort was too much to pay for the goal he had in view. It was not so much that he was a martyr to patriotism either. For his personal reward would make him independently rich, once he had accomplished his mission with Captain Caleb Rakestraw. He would meet Rakestraw secretly in Santa Barbara during fiesta week, and soon be custodian of the hidden treasure.

FURTADO was content. Dangers and discomforts would pass, once he had delivered the fabulous Silver of Satan to the guerilla chieftain, General Cabral Goularte, and claimed his reward. When that job was done, Senor Heraclio Furtado's part in the proposed overthrow of the Mexican government would be at an end. Luxury and security would be assured for the rest of his life.

In the seat opposite him, Erasmus Randeen was snoring noisily, hands clutching a rifle which he had once carried into battle at Gettysburg against the Yankees.

After the humiliation of Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Erasmus Randeen had returned to his native Alabama as a ragged, hungry soldier. Rather than endure the suffering which a brutal legion of carpetbaggers imposed on the prostrate South during the Reconstruction period, however, Erasmus Randeen had gone to Mexico. Eventually he had enlisted in the guerilla army of General Cabral Goularte.

Because of the man's bitter hatred for the United States, which to him would always be equivalent to the Union Army, Goularte had selected Randeen to accompany Senor Heraclio Furtado on his mission to Santa Barbara.

"A pitiful excuse for a bodyguard!" grunted Furtado now, his lips curling in disgust as he watched Randeen's body joggle with the sway of the Concord on its thoroughbraces. "Little use he would be in case of emergency."

But of course there would be no emergency. So far as the outside world knew, Senor Furtado merely was journeying to Santa Barbara in the rôle of an honored guest, to receive the plaudits of the Spanish population of the California city. There was no hint of a secret mission.

Oppressed by the heat of the day, Furtado made himself as comfortable as possible on the stage-coach seat and

dozed off, following his bodyguard's lead.

The interior of the stage cooled several degrees when the El Camino Real zigzagged its way into the Santa Ynez uplands and headed into the narrow corridor of Gaviota Pass. Beyond that cliff-walled gap lay the blue Pacific, and the last lap of their five-hundred-mile journey from Monterey.

Perched on the driver's seat was a lanky, salt-bearded Yankee jehu, a Wells Fargo veteran who had once mined gold in the Mother Lode country. He was the last of a continual stream of whip-crackers, for Furtado's stage had changed drivers daily, every time a fresh span of Morgans was hitched to the vehicle.

This latest driver, "Silverado" Stracy by name, had taken over Furtado's coach at the last stop, San Luis Obispo, before dawn this morning. It was his responsibility to bring the flag-draped coach to its destination in Santa Barbara, and he was dressed in his best marseilles coat and flowered vest for the occasion.

As the stage followed a burbling creek into Gaviota Pass, Silverado Stracy's rheumy eyes were paying little attention to the rutted course of the El Camino Real. Instead, the driver's gaze kept straying to the steep, chaparral-clad mountainsides which crouched on either hand. It was as if he were looking for something, or someone.

The cliffs came together and almost touched their granite shoulders ahead. Silverado Stracy knew little of history, but like most Californians he was aware that Gaviota Pass was where a rag-tag army of Santa Barbarans had lain in wait for Fremont's soldiers back in '46, ready to massacre the American forces on their way to capture Santa Barbara.

Thanks to the loyalty of a pioneer named Foxen, Fremont and his cannon had veered away from Gaviota Pass and had descended on the somnolent mission town by way of the little-known San Marcos route, further to the east. As a result, Santa Barbara had capitulated without a shot being fired, and had remained under the sovereignty of Old Glory ever since.

The looming cliffs of Gaviota Pass were overhanging the dusty road when Silverado Stracy's team reared back in the traces and snorted with alarm.

The jehu kicked his foot brake to halt the Concord as he caught sight of two masked horsemen emerging from the willows which screened the creek. Sunlight flashed from drawn six-guns as the two highwaymen galloped alongside the stage, taking opposite sides. One of the bandits wore the blue uniform of a Union soldier, and was mounted on a U.S.-branded cavalry horse of a mouse-dun color.

His companion was a Mexican astride a coal-black stallion.

STRACY whipped his lines around the Jacob's staff and raised his arms before the menace of the holdup men's guns. Catching sight of a pair of piercing blue eyes under the soldier's wide-brimmed campaign hat, Stracy winked. The wink was returned.

Dismounting swiftly, the two ambushers converged on the stage-coach and jerked open the doors.

Erasmus Randeen was awakened from sound sleep with the bore of a Colt .45 jabbing his middle. The bodyguard grunted an oath and reached for his Confederate rifle, only to find that it had been removed from his lap by a smiling masked Mexican.

"*Manos altos*, senor!" the Mexican ordered. "Hands up!"

The harsh command in Spanish awakened Senor Furtado. Blinking his eyes sleepily, the Mexican emissary slid his legs off the seat of the Concord, then froze as he found himself staring into the black muzzle of a Peacemaker .45 held by a blue-shirted highwayman, chestnut-haired and bandanna-masked.

"Welcome to Southern California, senor!" drawled the gunman, withdrawing his left hand which had been in the act of removing a pearl-handled six-gun from Furtado's sash. "We must trouble yuh to step out of the stage. Yore journey is at an end!"

Dazedly, Heraclio Furtado climbed out of the Concord, Erasmus Randeen following him with the Mexican's six-gun jabbing his spine. Surely this was not Santa Barbara!

Prodding their two prisoners off the

roadside, the blue-clad American called up to the driver:

"Continue on yore way, senor. Do not look back."

Silverado Stracy picked up his lines and lashed his team into a gallop. Furtado and Randeen stared aghast as they saw the jouncing stage-coach vanish out of sight beyond the cliffs of Gaviota Pass.

"What ees thees outrage?" demanded Furtado, recovering his voice at last. "Do you know who I am, senores? I am Senor Heraclio de Toledo y Aragon Furtado. I am—"

The click of his captor's .45 silenced Furtado's outburst.

"We've got a *casa* ready for yore use, senor," the masked man in the soldier's uniform commented. "It is back in yonder canyon a short distance. We trust yuh'll be comfortable there."

The next half-hour was a nightmare for Heraclio Furtado. With his jeweled sword dangling at his side, the Mexican conspirator and his sullen bodyguard threaded their way through the brush and rocks of a barranca beyond the creek, their Mexican captor leading the way astride his black stallion, the masked American in soldier garb bringing up the rear with drawn guns.

A half-mile from the El Camino Real, the barranca ended in a blind box. At the foot of the cliffs, a stone hut had been constructed against the mouth of a cavern eroded from the granite scarp.

"Back in the Fifties this *jacal* was one of the hideaways of a notorious countryman of yours, Senor Furtado," explained the Mexican politico's Yankee captor. "Joaquin Murrieta by name, the famous *bandido* of the gold fields. As yuh can see it, it's hid mighty well."

"I am not interested in all thees history and thees nonsense," Heraclio Furtado suddenly raged. "If you keel me, you will be hanged. Eet will be worse. I will order you burned at the stake."

"You will be dead, and you will give no orders," the gunman reminded him.

Furtado's face blanched. "Why are you doing thees to me?" he demanded. I am not a common hombre."

"You sound like a windbag of great volume," the American gunman chuckled.

CHAPTER VI

The Deserter

DISMOUNTING, the masked riders ground-tied their horses. The masked Mexican produced a key to unfasten the new-looking brass padlock which had been installed recently on the weathered slab door of the rock hut.

"Inside yuh'll find food and water to last yuh a week or ten days," the Yankee captor informed Furtado and his American bodyguard. "Yuh'll also find bedding. It's fitting that a distinguished Mexican *hidalgo* like yourself, Senor Furtado, should have the best accommodations the country can afford."

Furtado and Randeen exchanged dumbfounded glances. What was the motive for this kidnaping? This masked pair were not ordinary desperadoes, intending to rob them. What could it be?

"We'll now trouble yuh to disrobe," the Yankee went on, squatting down beside the stone house and twirling his six-guns playfully. "That's right, senores—strip off your clothes."

Erasmus Randeen started to protest, but there was no mistaking the deadly earnestness of these two amazing kidnapers. Behind their outer veneer of mocking courtesy lurked menace, backed by cocked six-guns.

Fuming indignantly, Furtado stripped to the skin, piling his *charro* jacket and bell-bottomed velveteen *pantalones* on the ground beside his steeple-peaked, gold-embroidered sombrero and his jeweled ceremonial sword.

Randeen shucked off his woolen shirt, corduroy pants and Mexican boots, his face bone-white with rage. When the two men had stripped to the skin and stood shivering in the cool breeze, the masked man in the soldier's uniform gestured toward Joaquin Murrieta's shack with Colt muzzles.

"Are you-all plannin' to leave us heah to stahve?" demanded Randeen, his voice betraying a strong Southern ac-

cent. "Theah ain't no windahs. Theah ain't no—"

A six-gun muzzle prodding his back made the ex-Confederate trooper jump into the Murrieta cabin behind the round-faced Mexican whose personal safety had been Randeen's trust.

"I told yuh there was food enough here for ten days," growled the Yankee, and a moment later the slab door swung shut on stone pivots, and the Mexican bandit had snapped the big padlock.

Lowering their bandanna masks, the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles scooped up their victims' clothing, mounted and rode back down the barranca. Once out of earshot of the Murrieta hideout, they threw back their heads and laughed loud and long.

"So far, so good," commented Bob Pryor. "We might as well stop here and change clothes, Celestino. I know yuh're itchin' to rig yoreself out in Furtado's fancy duds."

They dismounted in the shade of a *sicomoro* and stripped out of their own clothing, which they packed carefully in their saddle-bags. In a few minutes they stood before each other in the garb of their erstwhile prisoners.

It was an amazing transformation. Celestino Mireles fit Furtado's dashing *gaucho* costume as if he had been the tailor's original model. The Rio Kid cut a less striking picture in Erasmus Randeen's more mundane garb. But both looked the parts they meant to play.

"Reckon we'll pass for a diplomat and his majordomo when we hit Santa Barbara, amigo?" laughed Captain Bob Pryor, buckling his own six-guns about his midriff.

Celestino drew Furtado's fancy sword from its silver scabbard, sprung the fine Toledo blade into a U bend, then executed the *en garde* stance of a master swordsman and thrust and parried with an imaginary fencing duelist.

"I am the gay *caballero*, no?" chortled the Mexican, as they remounted. "I weel make thos' senoritas' hearts flutter when we reach Santa Barbara, *es seguro*. I am a dream to make a *damisela* swoon weeth ecstasy. Eef I but had a guitar, General, I would seeng the serenade."

They came in view of El Camino Real after a short ride. There, waiting for them under the rimming cliffs of Gaviota Pass was the red and yellow Concord stage-coach.

Silverado Stracy was grinning from ear to ear as the two "bandits" cantered up to his waiting coach.

"Cap'n Pryor, suh?" asked the jehu. "I'm Silverado Stracy of the San Luis Obispo garrison, at yore service, suh. The courier from Monterey brung yore message to my commandante last night. It warn't no trouble gettin' me on as substitute driver for this wagon."

THE Rio Kid's teeth flashed in a gay grin. Thanks to the knowledge of the local terrain which he had picked up from John C. Fremont, and the clockwork cooperation of the U.S. Army in providing an accomplice to drive Furtado's stage, his plans were proceeding without a miss.

"Well done, Stracy," he complimented the jehu. "We'll let our horses trail us into the outskirts of Santa Barbara.

[*Turn page*]

Yuh suppose they'll have a brass band out to welcome us, Senor Furtado?"

While the stage-coach moved on and got under way for Santa Barbara, high on a rock-toothed ridge overlooking Gaviota Pass, two riders mounted on lather-flecked palomino geldings watched the coach resume its trip down the El Camino Real.

Lowering their field-glasses, the riders saw the stage road as a winding gray ribbon, the stage-coach a mere speck followed by two saddled but riderless horses.

Wind fluttered the red Dundreary whiskers on Jule Fesster's cheeks as he cased his glasses and turned to regard the unshaven, shifty-eyed man in the Army uniform who had reined up alongside his stirrup.

"It don't make sense, Malotte!" the Monterey gambler commented thickly. "We seen this Captain Pryor and his Mexican pard hold up the stage and kidnap Furtado and his bodyguard. Then Furtado and the guard come ridin' back to the stage-coach on their kidnapers' hosses, with the stage-coach waitin' for 'em like the jehu knowed they were comin' back pronto. It don't make sense, I tell yuh."

Sergeant Zero Malotte shook his head and mopped his pock-pitted face with a bandanna. Although his campaign hat bore the yellow cords and acorns of the cavalry, Malotte was strictly a desk man and their day and night ride from Monterey had sorely taxed the sergeant's strength.

"Somethin's gone wrong, Jule," grumbled the soldier from the Monterey Presidio. "Like yuh say, it ain't natural that a Mexican politico like Furtado could pull a switch on Cap'n Pryor. That Rio Kid's foxy as they come, Jule. You should of heard how the Old Man bragged about the Kid when Stanford and Fremont was visitin' the post."

Fesster piled his pale white hands on the saddle-horn, his gooseberry eyes focused on the blue-hazed gulf of the barranca out of which they had watched the kidnapers' horses emerge to join the waiting stage-coach.

Like Malotte, Jule Fesster was used to an indoor, sedentary life. The most physical exercise he had had in ten years was spinning a roulette wheel in the Bear Flag Saloon. Now his thighs were saddle-galled, and his face was gaunt in its frame of cinnamon whiskers, from the rigors of their back trail.

"One thing certain," he said. "The Rio Kid an' his Mexican pardner must have been left behind in that gulch down there. We'll take a *pasear* down there and see if we can find 'em, Zero. If Furtado didn't kill that Pryor hombre, I will. That charmed life of his they talk about is due for a sudden end."

As he spoke, Fesster's prehensile fingers were groping under his broadcloth coat, feeling the bayonet which hung in a concealed sheath under his armpit.

"Yuh had one chance to cash in Pryor's chips and yuh knifed Lieutenant Hickey instead," jeered Malotte, as they gigged their horses down the steep slope. "Personally, I'm in favor of pullin' stakes, Jule."

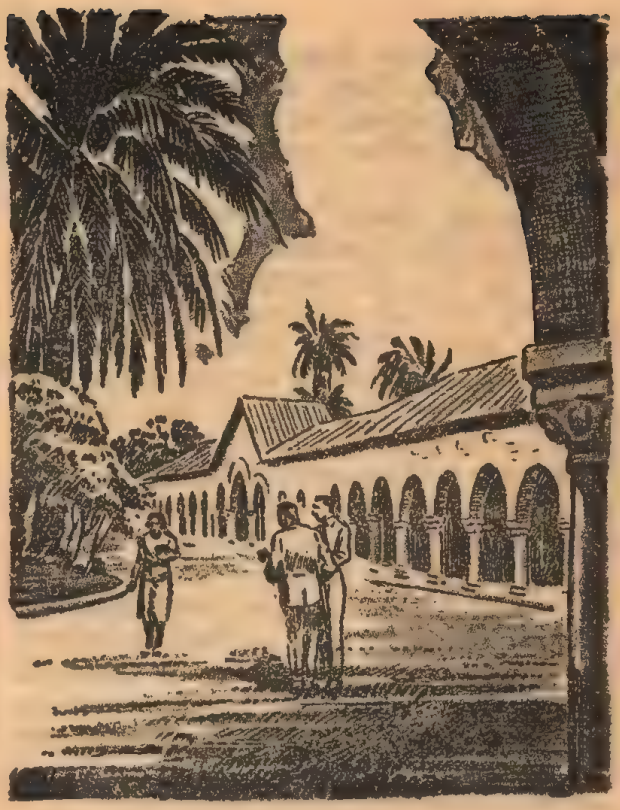
Malotte speared the sergeant with a contemptuous glance.

"Yuh forget yuh're a deserter from the U.S. Army, as of April tenth," rasped the gambler. "When yuh didn't report back on the post for reveille the next mornin', yuh was ticketed on Colonel Weatherby's mornin' reports as A.W.O.L., Malotte. Yuh aim to flirt with a firin' squad?"

Malotte shuddered and subsided into silence. He backtracked in memory to the day, years before, when as a member of the Confederate volunteers under John Hood he had been dispatched to Nevada on a secret mission, along with a platoon of hard-bitten Johnny Rebs.

Malotte's platoon had been assigned the job of looting one of Leland Stanford's mule trains carrying silver ingots from Nevada to San Francisco, for transshipment to a Union gunboat.

MALOTTE'S platoon had carried out their mission well, massacring Stanford's treasure freighters to the last man. The coup had been made possible by a Confederate sympathizer in Virginia City who had tipped off Malotte's troops as to the exact date of Stanford's silver shipment, and the route their mule train would take across the Sierra Nevadas.



LELAND STANFORD

THIS famous "Westerner," whose life is so intimately linked with the development of California, was born in New York. He moved to San Francisco in the heyday of the gold rush to practise law. He invested heavily in gold and silver lands in California and Nevada, running up a fortune of over fifty million dollars.

Stanford first entered politics in 1860 when he was a delegate to the convention which nominated Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency. He helped found the Central Pacific Railroad and became its president, and had the honor of driving the famous golden spike at Promontory Point, Utah, when the Central Pacific rails met the rails of the Union Pacific. This wedding of the rails marked the first time the continent had been united by steel and steam, the real beginning of the West's era of prosperity.

During the Civil War, Stanford's fortune helped the Union. He was elected Governor of California at this critical time, following that by a term in the U. S. Senate, from which he retired in 1891.

Since his death in 1893, Leland Stanford has been best remembered for the Leland Stanford Jr. University which he and his wife, Jane, founded at Palo Alto with an endowment of twenty million dollars, in memory of their only child, Leland Jr., who died in his seventeenth year. Stanford University now ranks as one of the foremost educational institutions in America, also perpetuating the memory of one of America's ablest and wealthiest statesmen and philanthropists.

It struck Zero Malotte as ironic, now, to recall that the grim-faced gambler who rode at his stirrup had been the self-same spy in Virginia City who had made the robbery of the Silver of Satan possible in the first place.

Malotte's Rebel troops had risked their lives to smuggle the Silver of Satan across a hostile state and, under the very guns of the Union forts guarding Monterey Bay, had loaded the silver aboard a Confederate blockade runner at anchor there under the innocent guise of a fishing vessel—Captain Caleb Rakestraw's ill-fated *Dixie Queen*.

Years later, when the Civil War had long been over and Zero Malotte had a job at the headquarters of the Monterey Presidio, he had got wind of the whereabouts of the missing Silver of Satan.

He had sent for Jule Fesster to come from Virginia City, Nevada, while he, Malotte, remained on duty in Colonel Weatherby's office to carry on his rôle as a spy.

"Buck up, Sarg!" chuckled Fesster, as they reached the floor of the pass and headed up into the barranca where they had seen the Rio Kid and his Mexican friend take their kidnap victims. "Things ain't as black as yuh think. We let that silver slip out of our fingers back in Sixty-five, Malotte. But it's waitin' for us somewheres in these very mountains, mebbe within a stone's throw of where we are now."

Zero Malotte's scarred face relaxed in a grin. After all, they were nearing the goal of a long and perilous journey. The key to the hiding place of the million-dollar silver cache was locked in the brain of Captain Caleb Rakestraw of the wrecked *Dixie Queen,* and it should be possible to release it.

Malotte had learned enough during his spying on Colonel Weatherby's secret papers in Monterey to know that Rakestraw was living under an assumed name in Santa Barbara. As yet he had not been able to ferret out that nom de plume, but with the arrival of Senor Heraclio Furtado in the mission town, Rakestraw would reveal himself to General Goularte's representative, and Malotte meant to be on the lookout for that meeting.

Sooner or later, Furtado would be led to the silver cache in the Santa Ynez range or wherever Rakestraw had buried the Silver of Satan. If he played his cards right, Malotte was certain that he and Jule Fesster would be splitting that silver cache between them, and he hoped that day was not far off.

"I've gone too far to back out now, Jule," the deserter admitted. "All I want is to get hold of my share of the silver and hightail out of California for good. Out of the U.S.A., for that matter. The Army would never quit hunting me. I'd be shot for treason shore as yuh're alive."

The two conspirators rode with guns palmed, as they saw they were nearing the dead end of the barranca. So far they had seen no trace of the Rio Kid and his partner, dead or alive.

CHAPTER VII

Murrieta's Den

BREAKING out of a thicket of junipers, Fesster and Malotte caught sight of a three-sided stone shack built against a cavern opening at the base of the barranca wall.

Sunlight flashed from a brand-new brass padlock which closed the slab door. The shack was without windows.

"Must be a prospector's cabin," grunted Fesster, staring around. "We missed the Rio Kid and his Mexican pard somewheres along the back trail."

They were in the act of reining around to retrace their course down the barranca when a low sound of human voices reached their ears, from inside the locked cabin. Two men, it appeared, were engaged in a bitter argument inside. They were speaking in Spanish.

Exchanging puzzled glances, Fesster and the Army deserter spurred up closer to the cabin, listening. Neither of them could understand what was being said, for neither knew the language.

"Hey, in there!" yelled Jule Fesster, hauling a Sharps buffalo rifle from the boot under his saddle fender. "What's the argument?"

Momentary silence greeted them. Then a high-pitched voice called out from behind the thick stone walls:

"*Hola!* Have you come back?"

Fesster swung out of stirrups and passed his reins to Zero Malotte. Then, holding the rifle at the ready, he advanced gingerly to the cabin door.

"You in there, Rio Kid?" he called.

A grating laugh was followed by a voice that was distinctly American, and belonging to someone who had come from south of the Mason-Dixon line:

"You-all are bahkin' up the wrong tree, suh. I'm 'Ras Randeen of N'Awlins, and my pahdnah heah is Senor Heraclio Furtado of Mejico City. We're honin' to see daylight!"

Fesster turned to stare in amazement

at Zero Malotte, who was leading the horses closer to the cabin.

"It could be a trick, Jule!" whispered the sergeant nervously. "More likely it's Cap'n Pryor in there wantin' out. And that Rio Kid shore is cagey."

But an inkling of the truth had come into Jule Fesster's keen brain. He believed he knew, now, why the stage-coach had waited for the kidnap victims to return, riding the horses of their abductors.

"Stand back, Furtado and Randeen!" called Fesster. "I'm going to blast open this padlock."

Cuddling gunstock to cheek, Fesster drew a bead on the brass padlock and pulled trigger. The deafening echoes of the buffalo gun's report caromed and retreated down the barranca, and when the smoke cleared the padlock was hanging from its hasp, sprung open by the heavy slug.

Smoke was still curling around the doorway when two blanket-draped figures emerged blinking into the sunshine. Furtado and his bodyguard from Mexico City found themselves staring into a brace of pistols held by Sergeant Zero Malotte.

"How come yuh're locked up stark nekkid like this?" demanded Fesster, reloading his Sharps. "Yuh look like a couple picked chickens."

"We was held up by a couple masked hombres and dragged off'n the stage we was travelin' to Santa Barbara in, suh," explained Erasmus Randeen. "You-all's guess is as good as ouhs why them robbahs choused our clothes."

Zero Malotte opened his mouth to speak, but Fesster silenced him with a gesture and strode over to whisper to his partner.

"Let me do the talkin', Zero," was what he said. "We'll still be able to trap Cap'n Rakestraw—usin' that fake Furtado as bait. Savvy? Reckon yuh're onto it by now that the Rio Kid's up to lettin' his pard play he's Furtado."

Malotte frowned in perplexity. Events were crowding too swiftly for the sergeant's sluggish brain to follow them. But if Fesster's superior intellect saw that Furtado and Randeen could be of some use to them, the least he could do would be to string along and back Fesster's play.

"Gents, yuh've been the victims of two vile villains," Fesster said, turning to the blanket-draped pair. "Those two impostors who are wearing yore clothes happen to be Captain Bob Pryor of the U. S. Army and a Mexican pard of his'n. They aim to hook their claws on the Silver of Satan."

HERACLIO FURTADO'S swarthy face turned ash-color.

"The Seelver of Satan?" he echoed. "How deed you know about that?"

Fesster laughed harshly.

"Never mind where I found out about yore real mission to Santa Barbara, Furtado!" cut in the gambler. "The thing is, yuh wouldn't want Cap'n Caleb Rakestraw to lead a fake Heraclio Furtado to that silver cache, would yuh?"

Furtado choked on a Spanish oath.

"You mean, that ees why we were taken off the stage-coach, senores?" he managed to get out. "A plot to steal the seelver of General Goularte?"

"Yuh catch on right fast, Senor Furtado," Fesster said. "But my amigo here, Sergeant Malotte, and I—we fought in the Civil War with the Confederate Army. We do not want the Silver of Satan to go to the Union."

Furtado's wet cheeks ballooned with relief.

"*Viva* General Goularte!" he called out, voicing the rallying cry of the Mexican *rebelistas*. "You weel help me keel thees *Capitán* Pryor and the peon who poses as Heraclio Furtado, *si?*"

Malotte holstered his guns as he saw Fesster shake hands with the two conspirators from Mexico.

"We can't help it if the Rio Kid gets hold of Cap'n Caleb Rakestraw before we do, Furtado," said the gambler. "But those impostors won't live to rake in the Silver of Satan. Yuh can bet yore last blue chip on that!"

* * * * *

Santa Barbara's welcome for Celestino Mireles in his rôle of Senor Heraclio Furtado, of Mexico City, was in keeping with that city's traditional Spanish hospitality. A conquering hero could not have made a triumphal entry to a more lavish and colorful reception.

Scouts posted on the outskirts of the seacoast city had signaled the approach of the red and yellow stage-coach from Monterey as soon as they spotted the flag-decked vehicle coming down the El Camino Real from the direction of Gaviota Pass.

Midway down Goleta Valley, the flat, vineyard-checkered coastal plain between the Pacific and the Santa Ynez foothills, a guard of honor consisting of a hundred or more *caballeros* riding silver-trapped horses came in view to meet the Concord and escort it to Santa Barbara proper.

The Rio Kid, after a hasty consultation with the driver, Silverado Stracy, elected to turn over the interior of the coach to "Senor Heraclio Furtado" while he, in the rôle of bodyguard, flanked the coach astride Saber, his dun with the stripe down his back. That stripe marked the war horse as of "the breed that never dies." Celestino's black stallion trailed behind the coach at the end of a lead rope.

Before the travelers from Monterey were in sight of the twin red domes of Santa Barbara's Old Mission, the cavalcade of Santa Barbarans had met them. Dark-eyed senoritas rode up alongside the Concord to shower Celestino with bougainvillea blossoms and garlands of roses.

From then on into the city, Celestino Mireles fell into the spirit of his hoax, much to the secret amusement of Pryor and the stage driver. Celestino relaxed, to have the time of his life.

Reaching the city, the bogus Heraclio Furtado of Mexico City beheld a spectacle of breathtaking aspect. Flags lined the wide thoroughfare of State Street from the foot of Mission Ridge to its end at the saffron scimitar of beach where the creamy surf of the Pacific riffled its white pages against the shore line.

Santa Barbara had gone all out to pay homage to their fiesta's guest of honor from Old Mejico. Mexicans and Americanos alike were decked out in the rainbow-seraped costumes of Castilian Spain.

A military band from the Presidio led Furtado's coach down State Street while cheering multitudes lined the board sidewalks and jammed the adobe arcades, chanting *"Viva Mejico!"* and *"Viva* Senor Furtado!" at the top of their lungs.

When the stage-coach reached the corner of State Street and Cañon Perdido, the escorting band halted before a reviewing stand. It had been set up in the shade of lofty palm trees, a stone's toss from the site of what once had been Fremont's camp ground.

CELESTINO MIRELES, resplendent in Furtado's gold-braided *charro* costume, complete with plumed hat and jewel-hilted sword, alighted from the dusty Concord to receive the official greeting of the city of Santa Barbara from its *alcalde.* The official was a lantern-jawed Americano with a leonine mane of straw-yellow hair. He introduced himself as Judge Micheltorena von Bach.

The *alcalde*—a man of mixed German-Spanish blood, judging from his name—escorted Celestino up onto the bunting-draped platform with all the pomp due an emissary of a foreign state.

A shrill chorus of approval came from the feminine population, as they perceived that the fiesta's guest of honor was a dashing and extremely handsome young *hidalgo.* Celestino's dark, hawk-like, aristocratic features and flashing dark eyes had never looked more imperious. While Judge Bach struggled to make his voice heard above the clamor of the throng, Bob Pryor remained seated on Saber, his blue gaze flickering over the sea of faces.

Somewhere in this crowd, the captain of the wrecked *Dixie Queen* treasure ship was probably standing at this moment. Caleb Rakestraw, the skipper of a Confederate blockade-runner which had left its bones to bleach on the sun-drenched coast of this tropical paradise.

The Rio Kid drank deep of the beauty around him. Santa Barbara was a typical *Californio* settlement, with proud Spanish buildings rubbing shoulders with the squalid adobe *jacal* huts of the peon population.

Thirty miles out to sea were the rugged gray whalebacks of the Channel

Islands—Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel, protecting the roadstead where Cabrillo's galleons had first dropped anchor in the 1500s.

Towering behind the town were the tawny heights of the Santa Ynez range, pierced to the west by the vast crotch of San Marcos Pass, the route by which Fremont's canoneers had slipped down on the unsuspecting city to claim it for America.

A thrill coursed through the Rio Kid as he realized that somewhere back in those frowning, haze-purpled fastnesses, a treasure of incalculable value had been buried all these years since the Civil War had come to its bloody, inevitable end.

Celestino's voice snapped Pryor back to reality, reminding him of the grim rôles they were playing in this masquerade. They were rôles which would bring swift death to both of them if the truth of their imposture became known.

Celestino, carrying out his part as a visiting dignitary from Mexico, was displaying a flare for histrionics which brought a grin of amusement to Pryor's lips. The Rio Kid's high-born Mexican partner was exhorting the assembled multitude in flowery Spanish platitudes.

"Mexico is honored to send an ambassador to your charming city by the blue sea." Celestino's rich voice carried up and down State Street. "I am deeply honored and humbly grateful to represent our sister republic at Santa Barbara's fiesta. The charm of your city is surpassed only by the beauty of your women. Citizens of Santa Barbara, I salute you!"

Celestino held his jeweled sword aloft, bowing to the tumultuous applause of the assembled citizenry.

"*Viva* Heraclio Furtado!" shrieked the crowd. "*Viva* Mejico! *Salud y fortuna,* Senor Furtado!"

From that moment on, the Rio Kid had no chance to get within talking distance of his partner. Judge Micheltorena von Bach whisked the Mexican guest of honor into a flower-decked carriage, and set off on a tour of the city.

A smile came to the Rio Kid's features as he wondered how Celestino was taking this ovation. Never before had Celestino experienced such hero worship.

CHAPTER VIII

Death Warning

STARTING at Cabrillo's Landing on the beach, Celestino was forced to swallow his boredom and evince great interest in Santa Barbara's many sights, winding up with a conducted tour of the Franciscan mission.

The sun was setting over the curved brow of La Mesa's treeless heights west of the city before Celestino was conducted with pomp and ceremony to his suite at the Pacific House, Santa Barbara's most pretentious hostelry. He was ready by then for a rest in that luxurious setting.

After the Rio Kid had seen to the stabling of their two horses, he made his way up to the royal suite, identifying himself to the attendants on duty as Senor Furtado's aide. *Mozos* had brought Heraclio Furtado's baggage from the stage-coach, so when the Rio Kid entered the private suite, he found Celestino admiring a great pile of elaborate Mexican clothing which he had removed from Furtado's trunk.

"*Por diablo,* but thees business of being a *renombre* has eets deesadvantages, General!" groaned Celestino, after looking quickly around to make sure they were alone. "*Caramba,* what a day! The flowers, the senoritas clamoring een my ears, the dull speeches. And tonight thees tired feet weel be expected to dance the fandango weeth Santa Barbara's loveliest *damiselas.* Eet ees the life of a dog I am leading, General!"

The Rio Kid opened a trunk bearing Erasmus Randeen's name on a brass plate. When he lifted out a colorful *gaucho* costume he realized that he should have been wearing that gaudy apparel instead of the bodyguard's shabby traveling clothes.

"Yuh're doing a great job, Celestino," chuckled Bob Pryor. "Just keep it up until Caleb Rakestraw makes his ap-

pearance. Santa Barbara takes it for granted yuh're Heraclio Furtado. Let's hope we can fool Rakestraw as easy."

Celestino paraded before a mirror in one of Furtado's cloth-of-gold *serapes,* strutting like a peacock.

"Can you imagine me—an orphan *pelado* from the Rio Grande—being wined and dined like a monarch?" the Mexican chuckled. Then his face sobered. "But what eef the real Senor Furtado was to show up, General!?"

Bob Pryor shook his head.

"No chance of that, *amigo mio.* Joaquin Murrieta's *cabana* is a sturdy prison. Furtado and Randeen will stay put until we are ready to release them."

They had less than an hour's rest before the *alcalde,* Judge Bach, arrived with a delegation of Santa Barbara's most distinguished citizens. The official greeter announced that they had come to escort Senor Furtado to a banquet in his honor.

The banquet was followed by a Grand *Baile,* held in the sumptuous ballroom of the Pacific House and attended by Santa Barbara's elite dons and grandees.

The Rio Kid, decked out in Randeen's elaborate Spanish *pantalones* and gold-trimmed *gaucho* jacket, remained on the side lines, courteously declining numerous invitations to be introduced to various Santa Barbara belles. His duty was to remain in the background, he explained, not to share the dance floor with his distinguished *patrone.*

The ball reached its climax after midnight, with the Mexican marimba orchestra playing a medley of Old World waltzes. Celestino found himself dancing with an amber-eyed, raven-haired senorita named Janell Bach, whom the *alcalde* of Santa Barbara had proudly introduced as his stepdaughter.

Clad in sweeping silken skirts and with her lustrous black hair set off by a lace mantilla, Janell Bach might have been a Spanish *damisela.* But her speech held the soft accent of the American South, the silvery tones of a Creole beauty from New Orleans rather than a native Californian.

Senorita Janell spoke Spanish with a quaint accent which Celestino found completely charming.

"There will be other dances during fiesta week," Celestino whispered in Janell's ear. "I hope you will attend them all, senorita. Beside you, the other *damiselas* dance like the cow. You are like a floating thistledown."

Glancing down to see what affect this pretty speech had made on the girl, Celestino was dismayed to see that Janell's face was taut and white, her eyes wide and fearful.

"This must be our first and last waltz, Senor Furtado," she whispered sharply. "You must leave Santa Barbara!"

Celestino's face lost its gay animation.

"A thousand pardons, senorita, if I have offended you."

SHE shook her head, moving closer to him as the dance ended in a storm of applause.

"Your life is in danger, Senor Furtado!" she breathed against his ear. "You must forget the Silver of Satan. For you it will mean only death!"

Before Celestino could recover from his amazement, Janell Bach had broken away from him and vanished in the crowd.

It was half an hour before Celestino managed to seek out the Rio Kid. They hurried away from the ballroom and, in the privacy of the hallway leading to their suite upstairs, Celestino recounted the girl's ominous warning.

"She don't suspect yuh're not the real Furtado?" Bob Pryor asked anxiously, fitting a key to the lock of their private rooms.

"No, General," Celestino said. " 'You must forget the Seelver of Satan', she told me. What can it mean. How does thees *alcalde's* daughter know of the Seelver of Satan?"

The Rio Kid opened the door, then snapped his mouth shut on a reply as he caught sight of the long-haired *alcalde,* Judge Micheltorena von Bach, waiting for them inside.

Celestino groaned under his breath as he saw his host. The hour was late and Celestino was nearing the fag-end of his endurance.

"Ah, Senor Bach!" the Mexican greeted in Spanish with forced gayety. "To you I must give my thanks for the

happiest day of my life, Senor. Santa Barbara has welcomed me in a manner befitting a Prince of the House of Bourbon, that is so."

Judge Bach stood up, his customary fixed grin ironed off the tight slit of his lips.

"We can drop these silly gibberings, Senor Furtado," the *alcalde* said, also speaking in Spanish when the Rio Kid had closed the door. "We are alone here. There is no further need for play-acting."

Celestino stiffened, taken aback by Bach's sudden transformation from his former pose of a fawning master of ceremonies.

"It is true that I am known in Santa Barbara by the name of Micheltorena von Bach," the *alcalde* went on. "You have guessed by now that I am Captain Caleb Rakestraw?"

The Rio Kid felt his pulses race as he saw the *alcalde* hand Celestina a folded document—a captain's commission in the one-time Navy of the Confederate States.

Celestino broke the silence with a restrained laugh.

"General Goularte would be pleased to know how well you played your part in our plans, *El Capitán,*" he said gravely, handing back the token of identification. "All the while you were feting me, even I did not suspect you were Rakestraw."

Caleb Rakestraw ran splayed fingers through his mane of tawny yellow hair.

"I could not reveal myself in public," the former sea captain said. "But now we can get down to business. You are not too tired from the day's festivities, Senor Furtado?"

Celestino's lie had a definite ring of truth: "Is that not why I have come from Mejico, Capitan Rakestraw? Sit down. As you say, let us get down to business at once."

"My stepdaughter is waiting for me downstairs, so I must be brief, Senor Furtado," Rakestraw said, as the three men seated themselves. He bent a sharp glance toward the Rio Kid, his voice trailing off.

Celestino, reading the meaning of Rakestraw's glance, spoke up hastily.

"You may discuss our affairs in Senor Randeen's presence, *El Capitán.* He is my trusted *companero.*"

Rakestraw nodded vaguely and turned back to Celestino.

"You will be glad to know that your schooner has arrived according to schedule," Rakestraw said. "I sighted the *Chapala* day before yesterday. She is lying to in the lee of Santa Cruz Island, thirty miles off shore."

Celestino nodded, shooting a questioning glance at the Rio Kid. Neither of them knew what Rakestraw was talking about. The schooner *Chapala,* however, was obviously something for which the real Senor Furtado had arranged.

"Ah—that is *bueno,*" Celestino commented vaguely.

THE RIO KID waited tensely for Rakestraw to continue. Now, if ever, was the critical moment in Celestino's attempt to pass himself off as Heraclio Furtado.

"The situation is this," Rakestraw went on, unaware of the tension his words had brought to the two men from Monterey. "As we planned things in our secret correspondence, the *Chapala* will await our signal before coming inshore.

"I have arranged to have the Silver of Satan transported to a remote stretch of beach up the coast from Santa Barbara. The *Chapala* will be able to anchor a half mile off shore at that point. The silver will have to be transferred from the beach by means of surf boats. Your sailors are trustworthy, I presume?"

Celestino nodded, doing some of the fastest thinking of his life.

From what clues Rakestraw had dropped, it was evident that Senor Heraclio Furtado had arranged for a ship to come up from Mexico. She was to pick up the loot of empire which Caleb Rakestraw had smuggled ashore from the wreck of the *Dixie Queen,* in the closing year of the Civil War.

"The crew of the *Chapala* was personally selected by General Cabral Goularte himself," Celestino said confidentially, taking a shot in the dark. "Our *marineros* believe in the rebel cause to a man, Capitan Rakestraw."

The former Confederate shipmaster

nodded thoughtfully, staring at the pattern on the rug. The Rio Kid saw Celestino inhale deeply, relieved that one crisis, at least, was over. He had apparently said the right thing.

"Bueno," Rakestraw said finally. "When my ship was forced ashore by a Yankee gunboat back in Sixty-five, I had to work fast, senores. I got the Silver of Satan ashore at night, under cover of fog. We commandeered a peon's stable of mules and carried the silver back into the San Marcos Pass country."

Rakestraw stood up, consulting a turnip watch which he returned to his satin sash.

"I must be going, Senor Furtado," the *alcalde* said. "That is all I can tell you for now." He added significantly, "But I have arranged that you will be taken back into the Santa Ynez Mountains tomorrow on a deer-hunting trip, as part of our fiesta program for your entertainment."

For the first time, the Rio Kid put a word into the discussion.

"The idea being that our deer-hunting trip will take us to the silver cache, senor?" he asked, speaking Spanish himself, and grinning.

"That is the idea exactly, Randeen," Rakestraw agreed. "Santa Barbara won't expect Senor Furtado back in town for two or three days. During that time we will transport the silver down to Goleta Beach. At the proper time I will hang signal lanterns on the mountain top so that the skipper of the *Chapala* can run inshore to pick up the cargo."

Bob Pryor nodded approvingly.

"And when the time comes for us to return to Santa Barbara," he said casually, "we'll be aboard the *Chapala* on our way back to Mexico. Is that it?"

Rakestraw's steely eyes hardened, narrowing suspiciously. Instantly the Rio Kid realized he had said the wrong thing.

"Of course Senor Furtado must return to Santa Barbara, preferably with a few specimens of deer to prove he went hunting, Randeen!" snapped the *alcalde*. "But you should know that. Furtado and I ironed out those details in advance."

Celestino stepped quickly into the breech to salvage a situation that had all the ingredients of danger.

"Senor Randeen does not know all of our arrangements, *El Capitán,*" the Mexican said reassuringly. He turned to the Rio Kid with a scowl. "You forget your place, Senor Randeen. General Goularte pays you to be my bodyguard, not to ask questions. You will forgive my *criado's* loose curiosity, Senor *Capitán?*"

Rakestraw shrugged and picked up his sombrero from the table.

"My nerves are jumpy, Randeen," he said. "It's been a big responsibility, this Silver of Satan. It took years of planning for me to figure out a way to get that loot safely out of the States. I don't want anything to go wrong at this stage of the game. Now I will say adios."

CHAPTER IX

Conspirators' Plans

PRYOR mopped his face with relief as he watched Celestino escort their fellow conspirator to the door.

Stepping out into the corridor, Rakestraw glanced up and down the hall, and lowered his voice.

"Horses will be waiting for the hunting trip to San Marcos Pass at eight in the morning, Senor Furtado," he said in a confidential monotone. "This time tomorrow night you will see the silver cache back in the mountains."

After Rakestraw had made his departure, Celestino and the Rio Kid eyed each other with satisfaction, glad that the critical interview was over.

"We'll string along with Rakestraw tomorrow" the Rio Kid decided. "There'll be time enough to lay our cards on the table when we've located the hidin' place of the Silver of Satan."

The two men walked over to the window overlooking State Street. From it they saw Caleb Rakestraw, alias Micheltorena von Bach, cross the street in

front of the Pacific House and climb into a carriage which stood at the curb.

Janell Bach was waiting in the vehicle for the *alcalde*. The Rio Kid and Celestino watched in moody silence as the carriage drove off into the night.

"I don't like the way things are shaping up, Celestino," Bob Pryor said grimly. "Rakestraw has swallowed the bait—I'm pretty shore of that. But why should that stepdaughter of his run the risk of warnin' yuh that there was danger mixed up in this Silver of Satan deal?"

Celestino slumped wearily on the bed.

"Eet ees a mystery to me, General," the Mexican said. "But the senorita she was not joking. Her eyes were like a frightened deer's when she warned me to leave Santa Barbara."

Long after they had retired, the Rio Kid's brain wrestled with the riddle of Janell Bach's whispered warning to the dancing partner she had believed to be Heraclio Furtado.

Years of riding the danger trails had whetted Captain Bob Pryor's intelligence to a keen degree, giving him the knack of gripping a problem in his teeth and shaking out the essence of a thing. Thinking over every detail now, he at last believed he had reasoned out Janell's motive in warning Celestino of peril in connection with the Silver of Satan.

"Celestino," the Rio Kid whispered into the darkness, "did yuh ever happen to think that Caleb Rakestraw is mebbe playin' a game as desperate as our own? He don't strike me as a man who is so patriotic and loyal to a lost cause that he would be willing to turn a million-dollar haul of silver over to the rebel chief of a foreign power—just to get even."

"I do not comprehend, General," Celestino muttered drowsily.

"Look at it this way," the Rio Kid said. "Suppose Janell has got wind of the fact that her stepfather, who is a judge here in Santa Barbara, is really a former sea captain who, as Colonel Weatherby says, was little more than a pirate to begin with. I think, Celestino, that Janell tried to tip us off that Caleb Rakestraw is plannin' to double-cross Heraclio Furtado. I don't think Rakestraw aims for that silver to reach General Goularte in Mexico!"

A raucous snore was Celestino's answer. . . .

Captain Caleb Rakestraw was waiting with three saddle horses next morning when Celestino Mireles and Captain Bob Pryor—whom he believed to be Senor Furtado and Erasmus Randeen—came out of the Pacific House, having breakfasted in their suite.

Santa Barbara's residents, having spent the night in gay carousal in keeping with the spirit of fiesta, were not on hand to see their *alcalde* and his guest of honor depart for the mountains on their much publicized deer hunt.

The Rio Kid was surprised to see that Rakestraw had saddled Saber and Mireles' coal-black gelding. Both mounts had been groomed and grained the night before in the Pacific House livery barn up the street.

"A man needs a horse he is familiar with for the trip we have ahead of us, gentlemen," Caleb Rakestraw explained, noting their surprise. As usual, he spoke in flawless Spanish out of deference to the nationality of his guest. "I took the liberty of having the hostler prepare your own mounts."

PRYOR and Celestino exchanged fleeting glances, each having the same question on their mind. Had Rakestraw, by any chance, investigated the contents of the *alforja* bags buckled behind their cantles? If so, the presence of Pryor's blue U. S. cavalry uniform would take some explaining.

The possibility seemed remote, however, and Rakestraw seemed in the best of spirits. To all outward appearances, he was the genial fiesta chairman, solicitous about Senor Heraclio Furtado's every whim.

Except for a few peons who were building an adobe house on Anapamu Street, the three riders saw no one on their trek up the wheel-rutted length of State.

Passing into Mission Canyon north of Father Serra's twin-towered Franciscan mission, they halted beside a rock-walled reservoir which early Indians had built under the supervision of brown-robed friars back in the 1700s.

Here, a wrinkled-faced, white-haired Mexican whom Rakestraw addressed as Pablo was waiting with a string of mules, thirty in number, each of which was fitted with a sturdy *albarda,* or Chihuahua style pack saddle.

"You must think we are bringing back a record bag of buck deer, Bach," commented the Rio Kid.

Rakestraw flashed him a strange look.

"It will take these mules and more to fetch the Silver of Satan out of the mountains, Randeen," the sea captain answered.

Celestino stiffened in saddle, his eyes shuttling between Rakestraw and the aged Mexican muleteer, Pablo.

"You mention the silver, in front of yonder *mulero?*" he asked in a half-whisper. "That is hardly discreet, senor."

Rakestraw's laugh reminded the Rio Kid of clashing sword blades.

"Pablo? He is as deaf as a post. Besides, we will dispose of him after the mules are loaded. We will leave no witness behind to see the ingots loaded aboard your schooner, Senor Furtado. Have no fear of that."

Celestino nodded as if in approval, but both men had caught the ruthless implication behind Rakestraw's words. it was obvious that the *alcalde* of Santa Barbara was a man utterly without mercy, a man who would not hesitate to spill innocent blood to gain his ends.

With Pablo and the mule train strung out behind them, they crossed over the gorse-covered western slope of Mission Canyon and headed in a northwesterly direction, toward the haze-clouded trough of San Marcos Pass.

The Rio Kid was thankful that he was riding Saber. The leggy war-horse, foaled with gunpowder and the boom of Civil War cannon in his ears, had shared the Kid's dangerous exploits in many a dangerous sortie. As Rakestraw had predicted earlier this morning, the trek ahead of them would demand the finest horseflesh available, and to Captain Robert Pryor, Saber was all of that. The dun was the fastest thing on four legs the Rio Kid had ever seen.

Over the rocky basin of San Roque and into the chaparral-mottled slopes of the Santa Ynez foot-hills, Rakestraw led the way. They had climbed a thousand feet above the sea by the time the sun had reached the zenith of its orbit and had begun the wheel westerly toward the distant headland of California's Point Conception.

Due to the geographical formation of the coast in the Santa Barbara region, the Pacific shore line ran east and west, putting the blue ocean expanse at their backs.

At noon they paused to rest their horses and to wolf down a meal which, Rakestraw informed them, Janell Bach had prepared before daylight. The riders had a superb view of the Channel Islands, lying on the skyline to the south.

Unbuckling his saddle-bags, Rakestraw drew out a brass-bound mariner's telescope which extended to a three-foot focal length. Engraved in the brass tubing of the instrument was the name *Dixie Queen* in flowing script. The telescope was a memento of the sturdy blockade-runner which had brought the Silver of Satan from Monterey to this southern coast.

Focusing the spy-glass on the inlet between Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa Islands, Rakestraw handed the instrument to Celestino.

"Sight on the cove below those white cliffs you can see from here, Senor Furtado," Rakestraw invited the Mexican. "You'll see your schooner anchored in the lee of the promontory there."

IN THE circle of magnified vision afforded by the telescope, Celestino Mireles made out the rakish outlines of a black twin-masted schooner, its sails furled, hugging the coast of the barren islands thirty miles off shore.

"Ah—the good ship *Chapala,*" Celestino commented, handing the glass to Bob Pryor. "A sturdy craft, Senor Capitán. She should get the Silver of Satan back to Acapulco in record time."

Rakestraw eyed Celestino sharply.

"Acapulco?" he echoed, puzzled. "I thought we agreed to run the *Chapala* into Mazatlan or San Blas—one of the smaller Mexican ports. Surely General Goularte would not risk sailing into a port like Acapulco, under the guns of republican forts!"

Celestino bit his lip, remembering that the Rio Kid had coached him to let Rakestraw do the talking. A single slip-up might ruin their entire coup, and Rakestraw was wary.

"Of course, *Capitán* Rakestraw," Celestino said, and smiled disarmingly. "A slip of the tongue, no?"

Rakestraw rubbed his blue-shaven lantern jaw thoughtfully, open suspicion kindling in his narrowed eyes.

"Tell me, Senor Furtado," he asked suddenly, "how many seamen does the *Chapala* carry on this voyage?"

Celestino groaned inwardly. Nautical knowledge was no part of the Rio Grander's education. He was more used to the cactus deserts and snow-clad mountains of the West.

"Uh—forty, including the capitan," he floundered desperately. "Good rebels all—General Goularte's pride. The nucleus of the rebel navy, he calls the *Chapala's* crew."

Rakestraw's mouth gaped open.

"Forty seamen—on a two-master of her tonnage?" cried the former mariner. "There will be no room aboard her for cargo, if you have converted her into a bloomin' slaver!"

CHAPTER X

Peril In San Marcos

CELESTINO was definitely in hot water. The Rio Kid, realizing the menace of the moment, sought frantically for a way to divert Rakestraw's suspicions away from his partner's stammering blunders.

"Hey—is it possible we're being followed, Cap'n?" he suddenly cried, excitedly pointing back in the direction of Santa Barbara. "Looks like dust in that canyon yonder!"

Rakestraw leaped to the Rio Kid's side, jerking the spy-glass from his grasp and training it on a smudge of white vapor which was lifting above the chapparal, miles away and hundreds of feet below them.

"It's dust, all right," Rakestraw agreed. "A herd of goats, maybe. Even if some nosey Barbarino took a notion to horn in on our deer-hunt, we'll shake whoever it is easy enough. There are no trails where we're heading."

The crisis safely behind them, Celestino and the Rio Kid were glad to be back in saddle. As they penetrated deeper into the mountainous terrain on the east flank of San Marcos Pass, it taxed their every faculty to follow Rakestraw's lead.

An intervening shoulder of brush-choked ridge cut off their view of Santa Barbara and its harbor. They were heading toward the summit of the Ynez range, following precipitous rim-rocks where a single misplaced hoof would plunge horse and rider into yawning, talus-fanged chasms. Continually they were fighting their way through buck-brush and spiny brambles broken only at intervals by game trails.

They were heading up the knobby backbone of a razorlike ridge between two jungle-choked barrancas when disaster struck—from a totally unexpected quarter.

A rock slide of recent origin had blocked the route Caleb Rakestraw had intended to use. The three horsemen and Pablo's long string of mules had been forced to retrace their steps to the opposite ridge.

Heading into the blinding sun as they rounded the lower end of the barranca wall, the mountain quiet was suddenly broken by the sharp whipcrack of a gunshot.

The Rio Kid, riding between Captain Rakestraw and Celestino, saw a puff of dust fly from Rakestraw's sombrero as a bullet plucked through the crown. Even as his hand plummeted to gun-butt, he caught sight of a rifle barrel protruding from a nest of boulders off to the right of the game trail they were following.

"Hands up, senores!" a harsh voice rang out of the rocky ambush. "Yuh're all covered!"

A salty oath burst from Caleb Rakestraw's mouth as he dropped his reins and raised his arms to hat-brim level. The Rio Kid followed suit, scowling in

puzzlement as he saw a second rifle barrel slide out of a manzanita thicket on the opposite side of the trail, its bore aimed at his chest.

Then, out into the open directly in front of Rakestraw's horse, stepped a tall, rangy figure clad in a tattered blue cavalry uniform.

Staring off past Rakestraw, the Rio Kid recognized the approaching soldier, who held a Colt six-gun in either hand. It was the smallpox-scarred desk sergeant from Colonel Jeff Weatherby's headquarters in the Monterey Presidio, Zero Malotte!

Even as the deserter reached up to slide Rakestraw's saddle carbine from its boot, two other ambushers stood up, silhouetted sharply against the brass-colored sky.

Though the sun was in the Rio Kid's eyes, he recognized the rifle-toting dry-gulchers. One was the Monterey gambler of the cinnamon-red Dundreary whiskers and the broadcloth coat, the man called Jule Fesster.

And his companion was Senor Heraclio Furtado, in person!

Celestino Mireles groaned in more than spirit as he stared at the Mexican whose identity he had assumed in Santa Barbara. His stomach knotted with horror as he saw the lanky figure of Erasmus Randeen come into the open, stalking out of the manzanitas where he had been lurking.

"What is the meaning of this?" bellowed Caleb Rakestraw, unleashing a string of mariner's invective at the ambushers.

HERACLIO FURTADO stepped down out of the rocks, following Jule Fesster to the trail. The Mexican emissary who had been left stark naked in Joaquin Murrieta's rock cabin over in Gaviota Pass twenty-four hours before was now decked out in cheap clothing which obviously had been purchased at some outlying rancho.

"*El Capitán* Caleb Rakestraw?" Hurtado asked, bowing to the wrathy-eyed mariner on the lead horse.

"I am Michaeltorena von Bach, the *alcalde* of Santa Barbara!" bellowed Rakestraw, his face paling to belie his defiant tone. "I am on a deer hunt. What do you want with me?"

Jule Fesster's laugh was brittle as he watched Zero Malotte strip the Rio Kid of his six-gun harness and proceed on back to where Celestino Mireles sat in frozen paralysis astride his black steed.

"Yuh're a plumb unconvincin' liar, Captain Rakestraw," Fesster rebuked him with suave good humor. "I suppose yuh're goin' to tell us that yonder Mexicano on the black hoss is named Furtado, and that this Americano behind yuh is his bodyguard, Erasmus Randeen?"

Rakestraw twisted in saddle, staring at the Rio Kid and Celestino. Raw despair was kindling in Rakestraw's eyes, as he absorbed the full brunt of the meaning of Fesster's words.

"Let us put our cards on the table, Captain Rakestraw," Fesster went on. "This string of mules would look ridiculous on a deer-huntin' trip. Yuh've gone to so much trouble to bring 'em up into these mountains—mebbe they're intended to haul the Silver of Satan, huh?"

The last vestige of defiance ebbed from Rakestraw's frame. He could only stare at the glib-tongued gambler.

"Wh-who are you?" he stammeringly demanded. "What kind of shoals have I run afoul of?"

Fesster laid a hand on Heraclio Furtado's shoulder.

"This Mexican gentleman," he said, "is yore friend from Acapulco—Senor Heraclio Furtado. The gentleman with the rifle yonder is his bodyguard, Erasmus Randeen. I'm afraid yuh've been hoaxed by two mighty darin' impostors, Captain."

Beads of sweat coasted like hot wax out of Rakestraw's pores. He turned, to see his erstwhile companions in treasure hunting being ordered off their horses at gun's point.

"A seafarin' man looks out of place a-hossback, Captain," Fesster went on. "Supposin' yuh climb off that *caballo* and rest yore legs while we talk this thing over."

Rakestraw slid limply from stirrups, making no move to resist when Jule Fesster expertly went over his clothing and removed a pair of six-guns from concealed armpit holsters under his brushpopper jumper.

"If you—if you're Heraclio Furtado," Rakestraw demanded of the round-faced Mexican in range clothing, "then who is that Mexican yonder who's been the toast of Santa Barbara these past twenty-four hours?"

The Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles, helpless under the leveled guns of Erasmus Randeen and Sergeant Malotte, met Rakestraw's confused stare with inscrutable grins.

"Yuh were about to show yore sliver cache to a Union Army veteran and his compadre," Fesster told the dumbfounded ship captain. "That tall man is Captain Robert Pryor, also known as the Rio Kid—sent to the Coast on the express orders of President Grant himself. His pardner, the man yuh thought was Heraclio Furtado, is a mere peon whose name I don't happen to know."

Celestino's dark, aristocratic face flushed, and he moved uneasily.

Rakestraw shook his head in baffled despair. Then he turned to the Mexican who claimed to be the real Senor Furtado.

"I can mighty soon find out if you're an impostor!" he cried. "How do we plan to get the Silver of Satan into General Goularte's hands?"

Furtado pointed off toward the seaward horizon.

"If our plans have gone well," Furtado said, "a schooner named the *Chapala* should be waiting out in the Channel Islands at this time. She will take the silver aboard, *Capitán*."

Rakestraw ran a hand through his lionlike mane of blond hair, in the dazed fashion of a man doubting his own sanity.

"It's simple enough to explain, Captain," Furtado went on, speaking in Spanish now. "These impostors attacked my stage-coach out in Gaviota Pass yesterday afternoon and locked my bodyguard and myself in a stone *casa* somewhere in the mountains. Then they proceeded to Santa Barbara, posing as the visitors you were expecting."

FESSTER cut in with a sarcastic laugh.

"It looks like their trickery was about to take in the jackpot, Rakestraw," he drawled. "But as good luck would have it, Senor Furtado took the precaution of having two more guards trailin' his stage-coach. I have the honor to be Jule Fesster, a personal friend of General Goularte. My amigo in the uniform of a U. S. soldier is Sergeant Zero Malotte. We were the ones who released Senor Furtado and Randeen after they were kidnaped."

Rakestraw's face underwent a savage transformation. Ignoring the bristling guns of the four intruders, the thwarted man strode up to where the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles stood side by side, arms raised.

"Thieves—tricksters!" screamed the Santa Barbara *alcalde*. "You have made a blathering fool of me, of Captain Rakestraw! I am not used to such humiliation from Yankees!"

As he spat out the last word, Rakestraw smashed a knotted fist into Pryor's face, sending him reeling back against Saber.

Celestino lunged forward, his hands darting out and up with lightning speed to lock his fingers on Rakestraw's throat. The next instant Zero Malotte had pounced like a cougar, slamming a six-gun barrel across Celestino's skull. The Mexican slumped, dazed by the blow.

The Rio Kid grabbed one of Saber's stirrups and hauled himself to his feet, blood dripping from his bruised nostrils. Resistance was useless, he could plainly see. Celestino's quick move against Rakestraw had accomplished nothing. Hemmed in by four gun-toting killers, to say nothing of Rakestraw, to resist would be sheer suicide.

Rakestraw turned to Heraclio Furtado, rubbing his throat where Celestino's nails had slashed off ribbons of flesh in his impulsive grab for the seaman's windpipe.

"You have my apologies, Senor Furtado," Rakestraw wheezed. "Now that I understand my blunder, what is there to prevent our proceeding after the Silver of Satan as we had planned?"

Heraclio Furtado's face lighted in a triumphant grin as he turned to Jule Fesster.

"Shall we dispose of the Rio Kid and this vile peon who had the effrontry to pose in my place, Senor Fesster?" asked

the rebel emissary. "I am willing to forgive *El Capitán* Rakestraw here. It was a mistake any man could have made."

For answer, the Monterey gambler handed Caleb Rakestraw the two six-guns which he had taken from the sea captain's holsters.

"This silver cache," Fesster said, as Rakestraw thrust the guns into their scabbards under his jumper. "Is it far from here?"

Rakestraw gestured vaguely toward the summit of the mountains to the northward.

"The Silver of Satan," he said, "is cached in an old Indian temple known as the Painted Cave. We can reach it in two hours' time from here."

Heraclio Furtado rubbed his palms together excitedly.

"Then why do we delay?" the Mexican asked. "Let us shoot these impostors and be on our way!"

CHAPTER XI

Flaming Doom

KNEELING beside the groaning Celestino Mireles, the Rio Kid, braced his muscles grimly. He had heard his death sentence. Better to die fighting than to stand up and eat lead.

"A quick bullet is too good for these Yankees!" snarled Caleb Rakestraw. "I have a better plan. Wait."

Hurriedly Rakestraw reached up to unbuckle a coil of lass' rope hanging from the pommel of Saber's saddle. Looping the reata over his arm, Rakestraw stepped over behind the Rio Kid.

Pryor was poising himself for a break. Sergeant Zero Malotte was standing within arm's reach of the Army scout, his arms folded indolently, a six-gun in either hand, a rifle leaning against the manzanitas behind him.

It was an impossible chance, a suicide gamble, but if Pryor could get his hands on one of Malotte's guns, he might be able to cut down Fesster or Malotte before he himself was riddled with lead.

He never got the chance. Whipping a six-gun from under his jacket, Caleb Rakestraw struck the Rio Kid a glancing blow across the base of the skull, pinching out his senses like a candle flame in a gale.

"What's the idea, Captain?" inquired Julius Fesster.

Rakestraw laughed fiendishly as he stooped down and whipped a bight of rope around the Rio Kid's inert body, pinioning his arms against his sides.

"We'll rope the pair of them to a tree and set fire to the brush," Rakestraw panted. "The chaparral burns like tinder this time of year. The flames will carry up the canyon here and roast these two impostors to a crisp." He added viciously, "And before the fire reaches them, they'll have time to regret trying to hoax Captain Caleb Rakestraw!"

Celestino and the Rio Kid were both dimly conscious of being dragged through the brush, down the steep wall of the barranca. Neither of them was fully conscious during the time it took Caleb Rakestraw and Sergeant Malotte to rope them securely to a dead juniper snag in the pit of the defile.

When they had finished, Rakestraw spat on his hands and gave the knots a final check.

"Somebody'll find their skeletons here, maybe," Rakestraw grunted moving off. "You head back up to the horses, Sergeant. I'll take care of firing the brush."

Rakestraw forced his way down the rocky bed of the canyon for a hundred yards. Then, selecting a tinder-dry copse of drought-killed mesquites, he took a box of sulphur matches from his jumper pocket and ignited the parched foliage.

Raw flame spurted, a mild breeze off the Pacific almost instantly fanning the mesquites into a bonfire.

By the time Caleb Rakestraw had scrambled back up to the trail and returned to where the others waited, the flames had spread to both walls of the V-shaped ravine and were advancing up the slope under fuming pillars of ominous yellow smoke.

"You are a man who hates Yankees, eh?" chuckled Fesster, mounted now on a palomino mare which he had tethered back of the boulder nest. "A true Johnny Reb. A man after my own heart.

Rakestraw grunted, climbing aboard his own horse.

"Their goose will be cooked to a turn," he commented, "long before we get to Painted Cave. Let's trim ship and get under way. We don't want dark to catch us."

Furtado and Randeen, mounted on horses which they had stolen from a foothill rancho the previous evening, took their place in the procession behind the led saddled horses of the Rio Kid and his Mexican companion. The extra horses would come in handy, Rakestraw pointed out, if Pablo's thirty mules proved insufficient to haul the load of silver ingots in the cache.

Caleb Rakestraw rode with chin on chest, eyes brooding. His evil brain was trying to sort out and unravel the tangled skein of events which had enmeshed him within the hour.

Out of his bewilderment one thing stood clear. He had no intention of seeing his long-hidden silver horde transported to some obscure Mexican port, there to help finance a political revolution in which he had no personal interest.

HIS original plans for disposing of Senor Furtado and his Americano bodyguard—quick bullets in their backs, while their arms were laden with silver ingots in Painted Cave, then take over their ship—would have to be revised. Two men he could handle, but not four. This Fesster who looked like a cold-eyed gambler, and the pock-marked Malotte with the three-stripe chevrons of a Union army sergeant on his sleeves—they were tough hombres, undoubtedly fast on the trigger in their own right.

But were they what they claimed to be? Were they actually friends of the Mexican *rebelista* leader? Something about the suave gambler and the sullen, taciturn sergeant — something didn't ring true about these scoundrels. Some indefinable air of conspiracy—nothing Rakestraw could put a finger on.

A hunch took root in Rakestraw's agile brain. Was it possible that Jule Fesster and Sergeant Malotte had designs of their own on the Silver of Satan? Perhaps they had lied when they spoke of following and rescuing Furtado and Randeen following their kidnaping. What if they had stumbled on the kidnapers' shack by accident, and Furtado had enlisted their aid with a promise of rewarding them from the loot which he, Rakestraw, had so long kept hidden?

Or, pursuing the startling train of thought a step further, what if Fesster, like himself, planned to doublecross Furtado? If so, then the Mexican from General Goularte's *rebelista* camp was surrounded by plotting foemen on all sides.

Rakestraw hugged his arms against his sides, grateful for the reassuring bulk of his six-shooters. Whatever the outcome of this incredible situation, however complex its crosscurrents of intrigue, Caleb Rakestraw was certain of one indisputable fact—the Silver of Satan was his, and would remain so, regardless of odds!

While Rakestraw and his four determined companions rode on toward the cache, with only the Silver of Satan in each mind now, a leaping tidal wave of flame was sweeping up the narrow, cliff-hemmed ravine they had left behind them, ravaging the dry gorse and chaparral in its path.

All manner of wild life fled before the wind-crowded holocaust—rabbits and cougars, fat rattlesnakes and whiptail lizards, screech owls and chipmunks. The furred, feathered or reptilian-scaled denizens of the mountain wilderness sought escape from the blazing menace, mingling in the democracy of common peril.

In the path of the raging inferno, Bob Pryor and Celestino Mireles struggled briefly in the bonds which trussed them back to back against a dead juniper snag, then ceased their futile efforts to free themselves.

Rakestraw's sailor knots had been tied to stay. From necks to ankles, they were lashed together with a tough horsehair reata that was strong enough

to have anchored a ship.

"Where deed we blunder, General?" panted Celestino hoarsely, as the first rush of overheated air smote their faces. "Another hour and the Silver of Satan would have been within our grasp, *es verdad.*"

The Rio Kid shook his head numbly, his eyes on the oncoming clouds of smoke. Doom was minutes away.

"We failed to take into account the fact that other outlaws than the Mexican *rebelistas* coveted that silver, Celestino," the Rio Kid said ruefully. "The same enemy that murdered Lieutenant Hickey in Monterey must have followed us, even as we were following Furtado and his stage-coach. We have only our own stupidity to blame, for not keeping an eye on our backtrail."

Through the scrub timber they could see the red tongues of fire now, fifty yards distant and coming fast, with a roar like a blast furnace.

Smoke and sparks smote their faces, singed their hair, tortured their lungs. The roar of the advancing holocaust quickly made speech impossible.

Many times in the past, the Rio Kid and his faithful Mexican friend had faced death, from one end of the West to the other, and in a score of disguises. But there was something overpowering, something too elemental about combating fire for man to cope with. It was enough to drain the courage from a man's veins.

BOTH men stiffened in their bonds as they saw a mesquite bush burst into flame a dozen feet from their juniper snag, oily leaves ignited by a flying spark. It was consumed in a twinkling, to leave a skeleton of smoking twigs.

Death by suffocation would probably be their lot before flames actually reached their bodies, as the brush fire sucked the oxygen from the atmosphere. Already, a drugged ennui was suffusing their senses, making them forget the agony of bruised skulls and constricting bonds.

And then, from out of the smoke, the Rio Kid saw two figures skidding and sprawling down the west slope of the ravine from the direction of the trail above. For a moment Pryor thought that Rakestraw had regretted his sadistic mode of revenge and had come to end their suffering with a merciful bullet.

Then he saw that one of the figures was that of a girl, clad in a silken blouse and split-type buckskin riding skirt. A cream-white Stetson had fallen back from her face, revealing a clustering mass of raven-black hair.

The Rio Kid blinked his eyes, certain that his brain was playing him tricks. Then he saw the pair stumbling in their direction, veering up the defile to avoid a flaming motte of buckthorn brush, twin wraiths dim behind roiling smoke.

Neither prisoner was fully aware of what happened next. Celestino, his eyes squeezed shut against the scarlet glare of the flames, opened his eyes to see Janell Bach, his dancing partner of last night's grand ball, slashing at his bonds with a hunting knife.

As the ropes fell away and Celestino stumbled forward, he could see that Janell's companion had released the Rio Kid.

The shouts of their rescuers went unheard under the organ-roar of the conflagration. Flames were on all sides, licking at the dead grass underfoot, thrusting out red arms to strip brows and eyelashes.

Blinded by the smoke, the Rio Kid and Celestino stumbled dazedly after their benefactors, scrambling back up the west slope. The brush was blazing around them as the full fury of the brush fire swept up the barranca.

Then, after an eternity of climbing that left them spent and gasping, the four struggled out on the ledge trail where two lather-flecked horses waited.

The conflagration roared on up the barranca to burn itself out against the dead end of hemming granite cliffs, reducing the juniper snag to a smoking stump of charcoal, stripping the canyon to its bedrock bones, smoldering in the grassroots.

For several minutes the Rio Kid and Celestino stood looking down at what might have been their pyre. They had been rescued from a horrible death, and now they were shaken with the horror that they had been through. They glanced at each other, then grinned.

CHAPTER XII

Doublecross Scheme

MANY minutes had elapsed before any one of the group who had escaped the brush fire had breath to spare in speech.

"We owe you our lives, senorita," Celestino finally gasped out. His face was soot-blackened and puffed with blisters. "You narrowly escaped with your own, it is so."

The girl brushed a singed lock of hair off her grimy forehead and managed a smile.

"We followed you out from Santa Barbara this morning," she panted. "I tried to warn you last night that you would ride to your deaths if you accompanied my stepfather into the mountains today. It was the least Dwayne and I could do for you." She indicated her companion.

The Rio Kid was studying the handsome young man who reclined on the trail beside him. The fellow was a stranger to him, but his clean-chiseled face was familiar. Then he recalled having seen the young American at last night's dance.

"This is my fiancé, Senor Furtado," Janell said, linking her arm through the stranger's. "Dwayne Jordan, who owns a saddle shop on State Street."

Celestino grimaced under his coating of soot.

"I am not Heraclio Furtado," he said. "I fear there ees much of the explaining to do, senorita, senor. My name ees really Celestino Mireles and thees ees my amigo, *Capitán* Robert Pryor of thos' United States Army."

Dwayne Jordan grinned as he shook the Rio Kid's hand.

"That makes our risk worth while," he said heartily. "I tried to tell Janell this morning that we should let Senor Furtado stew in his own juice. I didn't want to get mixed up in this Mexican revolution, however indirectly."

In terse phrases, the Rio Kid explained the mission he and Celestino had undertaken, which had brought them to Santa Barbara. He ended on the apologetic note that one of their prime goals was the arrest of Captain Caleb Rakestraw on charges of treason against the United States.

"In a way, though, I must admire your stepfather, Miss Bach," Pryor confessed, in an effort to soften the harshness of his revelation. "Captain Rakestray appears to be clinging to his old loyalties, seeking to avenge the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War."

To his surprise, the girl laughed scornfully.

"Caleb Rakestraw is not a loyal patriot!" she exclaimed angrily. "He is a criminal—a pirate! He has no intention of surrendering that cargo of silver from the *Dixie Queen* to any Mexican rebel."

The Rio Kid scowled curiously.

"Then why this plot with General Goularte?" he asked. "Shorely yuh know why Heraclio Furtado was sent to Santa Barbara."

Dwayne Jordan shook his head.

"Caleb Rakestraw has his eye on that schooner of Furtado's," Jordan said shortly. "The *Chapala* would take the silver aboard, true enough. But it would never get to Mexico!"

Celestino and the Kid exchanged incredulous glances. The Silver of Satan embodied ramifications of which they were totally ignorant, it would seem.

"It's this way, Captain Pryor," Janell Bach explained. "Years ago, when Caleb Rakestraw first showed up in Santa Barbara, no one knew he was the skipper of the *Dixie Queen*, which had gone ashore on Goleta Beach in a storm. Santa Barbara believed him to be a wealthy financier from Los Angeles.

"In a year's time Rakestraw had paid court to my mother and married her. Mother even forced me to take the name of Bach, which Rakestraw had given as his own. But it was not long until I began to be suspicious of all the evil-looking characters who visited my stepfather under cover of darkness. They were seafaring men—the crew of the *Dixie Queen*, as it turned out.

"I confess I spied on my stepfather," Janell went on. "I listened in on his talks with members of his crew, who were living on the outskirts of Santa Barbara, over in Montecito. From time to time they would visit my father and he would give them an ingot of silver—from the cargo of the *Dixie Queen.*

"As years went on, my father became a power in Santa Barbara. He became the *alcalde,* a respected citizen. Dwayne and I were planning to be married in the Old Mission last spring, but my mother's death delayed that. And at about the same time, I learned that my stepfather was carrying on an intrigue with rebel forces down in Mexico."

JANELL'S story, when she finished, carried all the bizarre overtones of a fictional narrative. It was Caleb Rakestraw who had conceived the idea of Heraclio Furtado's visit to Santa Barbara.

"What it boils down to is this," Dwayne Jordan put in. "Rakestraw's greatest need was a ship. He dared not buy a ship with the silver he had stolen from the government. That was where Furtado came in. He was to bring a schooner—the *Chapala.* Once the Silver of Satan was aboard her, Rakestraw's pirate crew from the *Dixie Queen* would swarm aboard and take the Mexican seamen by surprise."

The Rio Kid whistled in amazement. So that was why Rakestraw had been so angry when Celestino, in his innocence, had said the *Chapala's* crew numbered forty men!

"So that's the story," he said musingly. "Caleb Rakestraw would have his ship and the silver too."

Janell Bach pointed off toward the south.

"Right this minute, twenty of the roughest buccaneers since the days of Captain Kidd are lying in wait down on Goleta Beach somewhere," she said. "Waiting for the mule train to bring the silver down out of these mountains. When the *Chapala's* crew comes ashore to help store the cargo aboard, they will be ambushed. And then Caleb Rakestraw will set sail for the Sandwich Islands and the South Seas, to spend his life in comfort, out of reach of American justice."

Pryor got to his feet, flexing his aching muscles. The sun was a red ball poised on the slanting horizon west of San Marcos Pass, and the chill of evening was in the air.

The Rio Kid's brain was still spinning from the impact of Janell Bach's amazing narrative. In all his career against forces of oppression throughout the West, the Kid had never met up with an assignment which presented so many complex angles as this diabolical scheme of Caleb Rakestraw's.

"Those buskies have probably reached Painted Cave by now," he remarked. "They'll have to work most of the night to load thirty mules with silver ingots. I think Captain Rakestraw may have his plans interrupted, amigos."

His glance was riveted to the Colt .44 holstered at Dwayne Jordan's hip. A small-calibered pistol was carried by Janell.

"You two fine people have played yore part mighty well," Captain Pryor said gratefully. "I suggest that yuh ride back to Santa Barbara while there's still daylight. If yuh will let Celestino and me borrow yore guns we'll be able to attend to a few little things."

A moment later the four were shaking hands.

"Good luck to you both," Dwayne Jordan said, as he watched the Rio Kid buckle the gun-belt about his own midriff. "If it wasn't for seeing Janell safely out of the mountains tonight, I would like to be in on the kill myself, Captain Pryor."

The sun was dipping in ruddy splendor below the staggered skyline to westward when Janell Bach and her fiancé saw the Rio Kid and Celestino vanish into the brush up the slope, following Rakestraw's mule train toward the summit. . . .

As dusk deepened over the Santa Ynez range and turned the remote line of the Pacific into black ink under the stars, an eerie glow of lanternlight issued from the brush on a canyon slope just below the summit.

Long before the dawn of history, aborigines had discovered the cave, eroded by glacial action and the disintegration of millenniums of time, here

in this remote fastness twenty-five hundred feet above sea level. Prehistoric artists had chosen the cave as a citadel for worship, and had adorned its sandstone walls and ceiling with paintings in blue and ochre and russet and lampblack, weird patterns resembling spider webs and teepees, and shapeless hieroglyphics which were to remain forever unintelligible to students of ethnology.

"Painted Cave" had been visited by Spanish conquerors who had heard of it from the Channel Indian tribes who dwelt on the coastal flats below the mountains. But they had scorned the stone tools and the Indian basketwork as plunder unfit to transport to their anchored galleons.

Tonight, Painted Cave was the scene of feverish activity. Pablo's thirty mules were grouped on a terrace of sandstone in front of the cavern, their leathern packbags unbuckled.

CALEB RAKESTRAW, entering the rear chamber of the grotto alone, had emerged with two ship's lanterns from the ill-fated *Dixie Queen*, together with shovels which seepage water through the years had turned red with encrustations of rust. Exercising the dictatorial powers to which a lifetime on a quarterdeck had accustomed him, Captain Rakestraw promptly set all hands to work—including the lily-handed gambler, Jule Fesster, and Heraclio Furtado.

They worked without complaint, however, when a few minutes' shoveling in the drift sand floor of the cave brought to light a cache of oblong silver ingots. Long years underground had corroded them to a hue which made them resemble ebony cordwood.

Where a shovel blade had dented one of the ingots, the argentine glitter of pure Comstock Lode silver twinkled in the yellow rays of the ship's lanterns. The sight had brought a quickened tempo to the heart of each witness, and kindled avaricious lights in the gooseberry orbs of Jule Fesster.

"How about the sailors who lugged this silver up here after the shipwreck, Captain?" inquired the Monterey gambler, busy stacking ingots of the Silver of Satan onto the floor of the cave beside the excavation. "Whatever became of 'em?"

Rakestraw did not pause in his work of scooping the six-inch layer of sand off the buried cache.

"I am the only survivor of the *Dixie Queen's* complement," he assured them enigmatically. "And I have guarded the secret of the Silver of Satan well, I assure you."

Outside the wan glow of the lanterns, night fell thick over the mountains. Sundown had brought a chill wind sweeping up the canyon, a breeze which Rakestraw saw as a good omen for their night's work.

"We'll have this silver loaded on the mules by midnight, if all hands pitch in," Rakestraw said. "This sou'westerly breeze should bring the *Chapala* alongside the beach by dawn. How much canvas does she carry, Senor Furtado?"

The Mexican emissary was dripping

[*Turn page*]

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

with sweat from making round trips outside to where Pablo was packing the *albarda* cases with the heavy black ingots. Furtado paused in the act of shouldering a new load of the metal.

"She's fore-and-aft rigged with a fore topsail and a topgallant sail," he replied in Spanish.

Rakestraw nodded approvingly.

"We'll set the signal lanterns out on the mountainside at midnight," he said. "With a flood tide under her keel and a freshening breeze, she should log six knots easy. That would put the *Chapala* off shore before dawn."

As the hours dragged by, one after another of Pablo's mules was fully loaded, and it became evident that the Painted Cave cache could be carried in one trip by the thirty animals. They would not have to load the horses they had taken from the Rio Kid and his Mexican *companero*.

Occasionally the breeze wafted the odor of wood smoke into the cavern mouth, reminding them that by now their two foes were charred skeletons.

It was past eleven o'clock when Jule Fesster came back into the cave to find Caleb Rakestraw alone, lifting out the last of the Silver of Satan from the excavation. Outside, Sergeant Malotte and Erasmus Randeen were helping load the last pack-saddles, while Senor Heraclio Furtado, completely exhausted by the unaccustomed physical work, squatted on his haunches just outside the cavern entrance and held a ship's lantern to give light to the others.

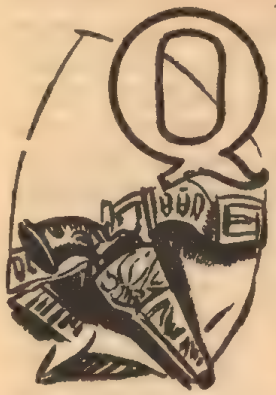
"It ees a sorry business for Heraclio Furtado to be doing," Furtado said aloud, wiping sweat from his brow. "I am weary to the very bone. It will give me great pleasure to take my revenge for all of thees slave labor."

His chief annoyance was that he had not been allowed to sit and watch the others do all of the work. He had a feeling that Rakestraw held him of very small regard, and that puzzled him, for the man had promised him great things.

Furtado remembered how the gunmen who had captured him had spoken to him. That certainly had not been very polite. But it did not occur to Furtado that he was being duped. Had it, he might not have been able to save himself.

CHAPTER XIII

Painted Cave Plunder



QUEER lights flickered in Fesster's gooseberry eyes as he squatted down beside Caleb Rakestraw, his face taking on an almost satanic cast in the eerie glare of the lone ship's lantern.

"I'm a gambling man, Cap'n," Fesster said, his voice a hissing monotone. "I'm goin' to lay my cards on the table. I know you don't figger on deliverin' this swag to any Mexican ship, Rakestraw. What's the play yuh're ribbin' up tonight?"

The skipper of the old *Dixie Queen* loosened his jumper to clear the gunstocks under his armpits.

"What makes you think that, Fesster?" he asked resentfully.

The Monterey gambler smiled enigmatically.

"I said I'd lay my cards on the table, Cap'n. What I told yuh about bein' one of Furtado's bodyguards wasn't true. Sergeant Malotte and I happened to be in on the deal back in Sixty-four when this silver was stolen for the Confederate States. Malotte helped load it aboard the *Dixie Queen* in Monterey that night."

Rakestraw scratched his lantern jaw thoughtfully, his eyes probing Fesster's appraisingly.

"It would be a shame for Furtado to sail off to Mexico with this swag," Fesster went on. "I know yuh've got some scheme afoot to keep that from happenin'. And yuh're dealing me in, savvy?"

Before Rakestraw could move a muscle, he found himself looking into the black bore of a .41 derringer which Fesster had flicked from a spring clip under his right sleeve.

A crooked grin creased Rakestraw's face.

"Put away that smokepole, Fesster," he said coolly. "I could use a partner. But only *one* partner, understand? Too

many hands in the rigging make for sloppy seamanship."

To Rakestraw's surprise, Fesster nodded. The hideout gun appeared to vanish from his hand as the gambler flicked his wrist.

"Exactly," he said. "We are both soldiers of fortune, Cap'n. A two-way split is fair and square, ain't it? I figger I got as much a stake in this silver as you have, seein' as how it was my spy work in Virginia City that led to the Confederates seizin' it in the first place."

Rakestraw leaned on his shovel, his yellow hair plastered to his skull with perspiration. A hard, ruthless, dangerous man, he recognized in Fesster a man of equal determination. Finally he nodded.

"All right, mate," he gave in. "I'll lay *my* cards on the table. I didn't massacre the crew of the *Dixie Queen* after we'd buried this loot. They're waitin' for me down on the beach above Pedregosa Point, waitin' to handle the *Chapala's* crew and seize the vessel. I aimed to set my course for the South Seas."

Fesster reached out a slim, manicured hand.

"It's a deal, pardner," he whispered. "When do we cash in the chips of the others outside?"

Rakestraw leaned forward, whispering over their handshake:

"We'll scuttle 'em here at the cave, Fesster. I'll give you the signal. It's a fifty-fifty deal."

Senor Heraclio Furtado limped into the cave carrying the lantern, his face haggard with fatigue.

"One more *mula* and we are ready to hang the signal lanterns, *El Capitán,*" the Mexican rebel said. "We have earned our reward from General Goularte, no?"

"You surely have, Senor Furtado," Rakestraw assured him.

Fesster and Rakestraw carried the last of the Silver of Satan out to the waiting mules. They saw Sergeant Zero Malotte and Erasmus Randeen coming back from the brush where the saddle horses were tethered. Malotte's pock-pitted face was grimed with dirt and bleeding from a dozen cuts, as if he had just returned from a pitched battle.

"The Sergeant tried to fork the Rio Kid's dun," chuckled Randeen. "The hoss piled him like he didn't know Malotte belonged to the U. S. Cavalry. That dun is strictly a one-man *caballo* for shore."

"I'll explain how we're going down the

"Come back into the cave," he said.

Caleb Rakestraw, watching as Pablo drew the last saddle-pack strap tight in its buckle, turned to the waiting conspirators.

mountain with the mule train. If all goes well, the Silver of Satan will be stowed in the *Chapala's* hold before the tide turns tomorrow mornin'."

SUSPECTING nothing, Senor Heraclio Furtado and his bodyguard headed into Painted Cave, followed by Zero Malotte and Jule Fesster. Caleb Rakestraw, bringing up the rear, paid no attention to Pablo, the deaf Mexican muleteer.

Fesster maneuvered his way to the rear of the cave, standing ready beside the empty treasure hole. His right hand was under the lapel of the Prince Albert he still wore, though it was now in a sad state, gripping the haft of the sawed-off bayonet with which he had slain Lieutenant Hickey a week before in Monterey.

Weary from six hours of back-breaking toil, Furtado, Randeen and Sergeant Malotte squatted down before the lanterns, bracketed by the standing figures of Caleb Rakestraw and Jule Fesster. The stage was set for massacre.

Over the heads of the squatting men they had marked for murder, Caleb Rakestraw and the gambler exchanged glances. The sea captain's nod was hardly perceptible in the lanternlight.

With blurring speed, Fesster jerked his bayonet from its hidden scabbard and drove the gleaming blade out and down. The razor-honed steel drove into Heraclio Furtado's back like a hot wire sinking into butter.

Simultaneously, flame spat from the muzzle of a six-gun which had appeared without warning in Caleb Rakestraw's fist. A point-blank bullet smashed into Sergeant Zero Malotte's chest, driving the Army deserter back against the painted wall of the cavern.

With a choked gasp, Erasmus Randeen snapped a gun out of leather and swung the muzzle to cover Rakestraw. Before he could pull trigger, the little derringer in Jule Fesster's hand exploded, drilling a .41 slug through Randeen's brain. Killed instantly, the bodyguard of Heraclio Furtado fell forward across the Mexican, his staring eyes inches from the bayonet handle which protruded from Furtado's back.

It was all over. In the space of five clock-ticks, the treacherous plot Rakestraw and Fesster had conceived had been consummated. Three bloodstained forms lay quivering on the floor of Painted Cave, under milky layers of gunsmoke.

"*'Sta bueno,*" laughed Caleb Rakestraw, holstering his gun. "Let's pull anchor and get out of here, Fesster. We got a long trip ahead of us."

Picking up the lanterns, Rakestraw headed out of the cave of death, callously straddling Sergeant Malotte's corpse. His back was turned to Fesster, and the gambler checked an impulse to dig a belted Colt from holster. But now was no time to kill his new partner. That would have to come later, if at all.

Splitting a million-dollar treasure fifty-fifty was preferable to going off half-cocked and ruining his chances of getting the loot out of California.

"How about the mule driver, Cap'n?" Fesster asked, as they tightened their saddle girths and prepared to mount.

Rakestraw shrugged, hanging the lantern handles over his saddle-horn.

"We need Pablo to handle the mules," he said. "The old gaffer didn't hear the shooting. He'll think Furtado and the others will follow us down the mountain."

With Rakestraw riding in the lead, Pablo got his thirty-mule train headed down the game trail which led to Painted Cave. Rounding a shoulder of the mountain, they saw the lights of Santa Barbara twinkling in the blackness far below, like diamond necklaces hung on the neck of night. Beyond, the light of a sickle moon traced a golden filigree on the Pacific.

A quarter of a mile below Painted Cave, Caleb Rakestraw set the two signal lanterns on a granite ledge, fifty feet apart. Within the minute, they saw a tiny pinpoint of light wink three times from the black bulk of Santa Cruz Island, on the horizon offshore.

"The skipper of the *Chapala* has spotted our signals," Rakestraw called back to Jule Fesster, who was riding at the rear of the string of mules. "He'll set his course for Goleta Beach. With luck we'll meet the small boats on the beach by daylight."

Like ghosts in the night, the silver-laden mules filed down the twisting trail into San Marcos Pass. To their left, the burned-out barranca where the killers had left the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles to be burned alive was a glowing garden of coals in the night. . . .

AT ABOUT the same time, fighting their way through the inky blackness of the conifer jungled mountainside, the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles were making slow progress toward the summit. Shortly after darkness had closed in, they had lost the mule trail.

Unfamiliar with the lay of the land, they wasted precious hours fighting their way into blind canyons and scaling the precipitous walls to pick another route.

They knew only that Painted Cave was this side of the divide, and Captain Bob Pryor was gambling that the treasure-hunters would be working with lanterns.

"General!" exclaimed Celestino, as they clawed their way shoulder to shoulder up a rock-toothed ravine. "Leesten!"

Faintly to their ears above the sough of the night wind through the chaparral, they heard a thud of hoofs from somewhere on a ridge behind and below them. A moment later, scrambling to the crest of the ravine, they caught sight of two lanterns gleaming like a cougar's eyes against the black wall of the mountainside to the west.

"We came up the wrong canyon, Celestino," panted the Kid. "Those are the signal lanterns Rakestraw left for the *Chapala* to see. We've climbed too high."

They started working their way down the slope, knowing that haste might bring their own destruction if they went over a cliff-brink in the darkness. The

fact that the signal lanterns had been set was proof that Rakestraw was already on his way out of the mountains with the Silver of Satan.

Nearing the ragged edge of exhaustion, the two partners were sliding and crawling along a steep granite shelf when they were startled to hear a horse whinny from a clump of junipers dead ahead.

"That's Saber!" whispered the Rio Kid, grabbing Celestino's arm. "I'd recognize his neigh from a million!"

Celestino nodded in the darkness.

"Those *ladrones* may steel be at work een Painted Cave," he whispered back. "We must be *muy* careful, *es verdad.*"

With infinite caution, they skulked their way into the junipers. Against a patch of star-powdered sky they caught sight of a group of horses tied to the junipers.

Saber whinnied again, proof that the cavalry horse's sensitive nostrils had picked up the scent of his own rider, and the Mexican who traveled with him. The Rio Kid and Celestino counted five horses in the group, among them Saber and the black stallion which was Celestino's.

"That's funny," the Rio Kid whispered in his companion's ear. "There should be seven horses, countin' ours. And where are the mules? They must have been makin' them hoofbeats we heard. Three of the owlhooters must have decided to walk down the mountain instead of ridin', for some reason or other."

They moved past the group of horses and halted on a wide shelf of rock. Dimly in the starshine, they made out the black gulf of a cavern mouth against the eroded sandstone cliff, and a ribbon of game trail snaking off down the side of the mountain.

"Thees must be thos' Painted Cave, General!" whispered Celestino. "They left these *caballos* tied here to starve, *si!*"

"Wait!" the Rio Kid cautioned, and he moved carefully to the entrance of the cave. "Let me go first. You keep back, in case this is an ambush."

"As you say, General," Celestino replied. "But I would rather take the danger myself."

CHAPTER XIV

Dying Man's Message

RAPIDLY, but stealthily, the Rio Kid crept forward until he stood inside the cavern mouth. No sound came from the stygian gloom inside.

Getting on hands and knees, the Rio Kid crawled further into the grotto. His hands encountered a rusty shovel. Pausing there, he decided to risk striking a match.

Thumbnailing a flame, Bob Pryor gasped in shocked dismay at what the tiny glow of light revealed. Sprawled in the grotesque attitudes of death, three bodies lay in bloody disarray on the floor of Painted Cave. The odor of raw gunpowder pervaded the cavern, biting the Rio Kid's nostrils. Another match revealed the dead men as Sergeant Malotte, Erasmus Randeen and Heraclio Furtado.

"Celestino—come on in here!" Pryor called out, as the match flickered out between his fingers. "There's been a massacre! Seems that Fesster and Rakestraw have wiped out their pardners and vamosed with the silver!"

Then, even as the flame of a third match was guttering out, Celestino rushed into the cave, and the Rio Kid and Mireles saw the Mexican emissary's eyelids flutter. Sprawled on his side with a bayonet impaling his torso, a spark of life still lingered in Heraclio Furtado's breast.

Darkness rushed in to blot out the picture of Furtado's twitching lips, where pink bubbles were forming, when the match flame died. But the dying Mexican spoke, his voice only a faint whispering exhalation.

"Senor—" choked Furtado, blood gurgling in his throat, "I have been—betrayed. You must—follow the evil ones—who would be traitors to—Goullarte's cause. They promised me—that—I" His voice died away.

The Rio Kid crawled over Malotte's

corpse and reached out to touch Furtado.

"Speak, amigo," he said gently. "Mebbe yuh can tell me where the *Chapala* aims to take that silver they'll be takin' aboard. Can yuh hear me, Senor Furtado?"

Furtado struggled to inhale a breath.

"The schooner—will lie to offshore—at Pedragosa—Point," he wheezed desperately, clinging to the slender thread of life remaining to him. "On Goleta Beach—due south of San—Marcos Pass. The *Chapala*—will reach Pedragosa—Point with—the rising sun—*manana*. It—it—aagh—"

Furtado's voice faded out in a death rattle. Celestino struck another match, to confirm the fact of the Mexican's passing. With his dying breath, Heraclio Furtado had given the Rio Kid the one bit of information he had to have—the exact point on the California coast where the Mexican treasure-ship planned to keep its rendezvous with the mule train and the Silver of Satan.

"Let's help ourselves to some shells and extra guns, Celestino," the Rio Kid rasped, as he stood up. "We've got our own hosses—a big help. Things ain't happenin' too bad for us after all."

By the light of another match, the Rio Kid made the satisfying discovery that Erasmus Randeen had been wearing Pryor's own pair of matched Peacemaker .45s. Celestino, who was armed only with Janell Bach's .32 pistol, helped himself to Sergeant Zero Malotte's heavy-calibered Army revolvers.

In desperate haste, they groped their way out of the gunsmoky atmosphere of Painted Cave, and hurriedly untied the five horses which had been left behind by the murderous conspirators. The extra mounts would eventually find their way back to civilization, and could forage on the way.

A moment later the Rio Kid was astride Saber once more, gigging the restive dun war-horse down the starlit trail. Behind him, Celestino Mireles followed on his midnight-black.

Ducking low as they passed Rakestraw's signal lanterns so as not to silhouette themselves in front of the lights, the two avengers spurred into a gallop where the trail became wide and comparatively level.

When they reached the head of a barranca which led into the gulf of San Marcos Pass, the Rio Kid dismounted to study sign. It was plain to him that the silver-laden mule train had followed the trail on toward the south.

"We won't try to overtake 'em—too much chance of bein' ambushed," the Rio Kid decided. "We can travel faster than Fesster or Rakestraw will be able to, with them thirty mules roped in tandem and loaded down with all that silver. Our job right now is to reach the pass itself and then cut over to Goleta Beach, Celestino."

WITH only the light of the California stars and a waning sliver of moon to guide them, Captain Bob Pryor and his Mexican partner cut off the beaten trail and began their tobogganing descent of the eastern flank of San Marcos Pass.

Distances were deceiving in the Santa Ynez foothills, especially at night. They could see the thin white line of the surf breaking on Goleta Beach, and estimated the ocean to be only seven or eight miles distant as the crow flies. But in spite of that their descent into the rugged pit of San Marcos Pass consumed the better part of three hours, and dawn would be breaking over the Ventura hills in less than two.

Reaching a thin line of wagon road which linked Santa Barbara with the Santa Ynez Valley, the two riders headed for the coast at a trot. Their winded mounts were too hoofsore from their descent of the rocky mountain slope to take full advantage of the sloping road.

It was four-thirty by the Rio Kid's watch when they finally put the rolling, live-oak-dotted foothills behind them and cut across the level coastal plain. Here were vineyards and an occasional tile-roofed, adobe ranchhouse.

With fresh mounts under them, the Rio Kid knew that the ride to the seacoast could have been handled in thirty minutes. As it was, the pale pinkness of the false dawn was staining the eastern horizon before the roar of the breakers met their ears.

Their view of the Pacific was ob-

secured by a pre-dawn coastal fog, through which they rode like gray ghosts. Then the smooth salt-and-pepper sands of Goleta Beach were under them, and through the rolling mists to the south they saw the phosphorescent surf rolling and surging against the strand.

The sun lifted above the Ventura hills beyond Santa Barbara's harbor as the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles reined up beside the walls of a fisherman's boathouse which had been built just above the highwater mark.

The fog-filtered daylight revealed a stony promontory jutting out into the sea, a quarter of a mile up the coast.

"Pedragosa Point!" exclaimed the Rio Kid, pointing. "If Americans, instead of Spaniards had named that place, Celestino, it would be Rocky Point."

The Mexican nodded.

"*Si.* And that must be thos' spot where the Mejicano boats weel land to peek up the Seelver of Satan, General."

The Rio Kid stroked his gunstocks thoughtfully, staring at the dense growth of pines which furred the shoulder of Pedragosa Point.

"Yeah," he grunted. "And the crew of the *Dixie Queen* are lyin' in wait in them trees, if Janell knew what she was talkin' about. A gang of gun-hung pirates waitin' for the *Chapala's* boats to come ashore."

Celestino reached out to seize his partner's arm, pointing off to seaward with his right hand.

"Look, General! A sheep, no?"

Pryor whirled, peering through the fog which enveloped the rolling combers. Then he saw the spectral outlines of a two-masted, black-hulled schooner riding the gentle ground swells a quarter-mile offshore. Celestino's "sheep" was the rebel craft *Chapala.* She had crossed the channel during the night to keep her rendezvous at Pedragosa Point.

Even as they watched, through the lifting mist, they saw three bumboats put off from the anchored schooner and head inshore, with sturdy Mexican sailors bending at the oars. The small boats were quartering through the waves in the direction of Pedragosa Point.

"We've got to warn them Mexican sailors about Rakestraw's pirates waitin' to jump them, Celestino!" yelled the Rio Kid. "Come on!"

Celestino opened his mouth to protest, thinking that Pryor intended to swim out past the breakers to meet the incoming boats. Then he saw that the Rio Kid was running past the boathouse to where an Indian dugout had been drawn up on the beach just beyond the high-tide mark.

Pausing to snatch a pair of oars from the rack on the boathouse wall beside their waiting horses, Celestino sprinted toward the water.

GOUGING their spike-heeled boots into the sand, both men gripped the thwarts of the Indian canoe and thrust it out into the churning surf. When they were wading knee-deep, the Rio Kid and Celestino scrambled aboard the dugout and picked up the oars.

[*Turn page*]

A ROUSING YARN OF THE INDIAN-FIGHTING DAYS!

The courage of the frontier soldier, battling hostile Indians and renegade whites, pitting himself against evil treachery—that's the colorful theme of a rip-roaring, robust novelet packed with fast action and breathless surprises!

WHO'LL RIDE WITH ME

By

MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

Coming Next Issue!

Despite their ignorance of boats in general, their paddle blades cut deep in the foaming salt water and sent the buoyant canoe racing out to sea, head-on with the rolling combers.

Brine spray dashed their faces as they rowed frantically, the dugout pitching like a cork in the gentle swells. Off through the fog, they caught sight of the *Chapala's* bumboats, heading for Pedragosa Point.

When they were within hailing distance of the small boats, Celestino dropped his oar and, cupping hands over his mouth, shouted a warning in Spanish to the tillerman of the nearest bumboat:

"Senores! Turn back to the *Chapala!* Pirates are waiting at Pedragosa Point to murder you all!"

The *Chapala's* sailors stopped rowing and drew together for a hasty consultation. Then the boats veered around and came up to where the Rio Kid and Celestino were fighting to keep their crude craft dead-on with the swells.

A burly Mexican in the foremost bumboat eyed them suspiciously, his hands gripping a rifle.

"What do you say of pirates waiting to trap us, amigo?" he called out, motioning for his crew to stop rowing. "Is this a trick?"

Swiftly Celestino explained, wondering as he did so whether he could add authority to his words by claiming to be Heraclio Furtado. But that might be dangerous. It was possible that Furtado had been acquainted with the skipper of the Mexican schooner.

"Very well, amigo!" called the boatman, tapping his rifle significantly. "We will be ready for the Americano pirates hiding at the Point. My seamen are all armed. We shall not put back to the *Chapala* until Senor Furtado's silver is aboard!"

The dugout was nearly swamped before the Rio Kid and Celestino got it prow-on for the beach. Off through the swirling fog, the three boatloads of Mexican sailors were heading for the beach, aiming to make a landing midway to Pedragosa Point.

After what seemed an eternity of rowing, the dugout's keel scraped on the sandy beach. Without waiting to drag the Indian fisherman's canoe out of the breakers, the Rio Kid and Celestino waded ashore.

Fog had closed in now to blot out their view of the Point where Caleb Rakestraw's pirate crew was hiding. They could dimly see the *Chapala's* boats bobbing through the breakers two hundred yards up the shoreline, with rifle-toting Mexican sailors scrambling ashore. It was like a scene from "Treasure Island."

"We'll let the sailors fight it out—that ain't any job for us to poke our horns into, Celestino," panted the Rio Kid, as they headed for their horses, which were waiting beside the boathouse. "We're strictly landlubbers, eh, pard?"

Celestino jacked open his six-gun and blew salt brine from the bore.

"*Por Dios,* yes!" he agreed heartily. "I would rather ride the outlaw bronc than get eento a boat one more time, General!"

With sea water sloshing from their boots, the two partners swung into stirrups and headed inland toward San Marcos Pass. And as they rode, they knew that Caleb Raksestraw and Jule Fesster might be arriving on Goleta Beach with their thirty mules loaded with the Silver of Satan.

CHAPTER XV

Gunsmoke Showdown

AS THE rising sun dispelled the coastal fog which lay in a fluffy white blanket over the isolated coast, Captain Caleb Rakestraw and his mule train were angling across a ranchero's wheat field, making a beeline for Pedragosa Point.

Old Pablo, limping wearily alongside the lead mule, saw the black-coated figure of Jule Feester spur up from the rear, the breeze rippling his cinnamon-colored Dundreary whiskers.

Even as the Monterey gambler reined

up alongside Rakestraw, the fog lifted like a curtain ascending on a stage drama, to reveal the gunmetal blue waters of the Pacific directly ahead of them. The sea was only a quarter-mile away.

The eyes of the two conspirators swung out to sea, to where the trim-hulled *Chapala* was riding at anchor in deep water, her sails furled, the Mexican flag bannering from her mainmast.

"Hey!" Rakestraw called huskily, as he caught sight of the *Chapala's* three bumboats drawn up on the strand two hundred yards east of Pedragosa Point. "Something's gone wrong. They should have landed out on the end of the headland yonder, according to what Furtado said."

Before Jule Fesster could even answer, they saw all Hades break loose on the beach ahead.

The *Chapala's* sailors, fanning out across the open benchland, were circling wide as if to block off the promontory. Sun rays glinted off rifles and six-guns, as the Mexican mariners swung out in a wide cordon to surround the thin stand of pine trees which grew on the rocky headland.

Without warning, a burst of gunfire ripped out from the undergrowth between the trees. As if by magic, every member of the *Chapala's* landing party flopped down flat in the waving salt grass, and triggered a merciless fusillade into the pines.

"Those *Chapala* sailors are ambushing my crew!" yelled Caleb Rakestraw, his face going bone-white. "Somebody tipped 'em off that my *Dixie Queen* crew were waiting to scuttle 'em."

Jule Fesster laughed softly, aware of an element of humor which had escaped the former blockade-runner who stood beside him.

"Pirates against pirates," he said. "Those Johnny Rebs of yours are caught in a trap, Rakestraw. It don't look like yuh'll have men enough left to run the *Chapala* to Tahiti, or wherever, in the South Seas—"

Rakestraw sat his saddle like a statue, unable to comprehend what was transpiring.

The *Chapala's* crewmen were skulking snakelike through the waving grass, closing in on the bayed buccaneers trapped in the timber of Pedragosa Point. The *Dixie Queen* ambushers were firing desperately, riddling the grass with leaden slugs, but they were shooting at a spread-out target which they could not see.

The Mexicans, on the other hand, were firing blindly into a concentrated thicket of underbrush, spraying the ambuscade with a lethal hail of bullets. Such spacing of their fire could not help but take a deadly toll of Rakestraw's henchmen.

Rakestraw twisted in saddle, staring at the long file of tandem-hitched mules behind him, each burdened down with silver ingots.

"We've got to swing back into the hills, Fesster!" he cried, desperation putting a break in his voice.

The gambler shrugged, reining around.

"It's all we can do, I reckon," he admitted. "Run back to the mountains and lay low till we see what happens."

The hoofsore mules brayed in protest as Pablo swung them around in a wide loop and headed for the distant mountains. Behind them, the pitched battle at Pedragosa Point was sweeping to a climax.

Wounded seamen of the *Dixie Queen* crew were breaking clear of the forest and plunging into the churning surf, hoping to swim out of range of the Mexicans' deadly fire. Others were throwing down their guns and staggering out of hiding, waving white handkerchiefs to signify their willingness to surrender, only to be picked off one by one by the *Chapala* sharpshooters.

Caleb Rakestraw was a raving maniac now, spurring up and down the line of plodding mules, whipping the jaded beasts with a rope end, trying to force them into a trot. Burdened under hundreds of pounds of dead weight, the animals were barely able to keep their feet.

OLD Pablo, himself jaded beyond endurance, threw up his hands and slumped face-forward into a grain field, unable to move further. Rakestraw dragged a Colt from holster and emptied it at the prostrate Mexican,

missing with all six shots.

"Don't waste ammunition on the *viejo!*" shouted Jule Fesster angrily, riding up with a gun in hand. "We've got a million dollars worth of silver here. We've got—"

Fesster broke off as he saw Rakestraw reload his Colt and then rein over to face the gambler, a thumb earing the knurled hammer back to full cock.

"I take no orders from you, mate!" screamed the sea captain, beside himself with rage now. "This silver is mine! I'll shoot any man who tries to say it ain't!"

Across leveled gun barrels, the two soldiers of fortune stared at each other, aware that both would die together if a showdown came now.

"Get control of yoreself, yuh gibberin' idiot!" snarled Fesster, his gooseberry eyes flaming. "We're in this thing fifty-fifty. Try to doublecross me now, and neither of us will live to enjoy this haul!"

Rakestraw's face purpled. But Fesster's logic was inescapable. With a savage oath, Rakestraw jabbed his gun into holster.

The mule train had come to a halt and several of the overburdened beasts had slumped in their tracks. Rakestraw leaped off his horse and lashed the fallen animals with rope and boot, but without success.

"We've got to cut 'em loose and head on without 'em!" Fesster shouted. "There's an empty barn yonder. We might as well hole up there for the day. If those Mexicans catch sight of us they'd overtake us anyhow."

Desperately the two outlaws sought to haze the protesting mules toward the adobe-walled barn beyond the wheat field. Behind them on the bench, they saw that the pitched battle was coming to an end.

Drowned members of the *Dixie Queen's* crew were bobbing in the waves off Pedragosa Point. The Mexicans had leaped from cover and were assaulting the ambush site in force, smoking out the last of Rakestraw's defenders.

As the silver-laden mules neared the deserted hay barn, Fesster and Rakestraw rode on ahead to lower the pole bars of the barn door.

They were heading back for their horses when a calm voice from the corner of the barn arrested them in their tracks.

"Lift yore arms, senores. We've got yuh covered."

Fesster and Rakestraw whirled, staring aghast at the two figures who rode their horses into view from behind the barn.

They were the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles, leveled guns jutting from their fists. Sea water had sopped their clothing, and their horses showed the results of a long and grueling trek out of the mountains. But neither man showed any trace of the ordeal by fire which Rakestraw had set to destroy them, far up the rugged slopes of the Santa Ynez Range.

"They're ghosts, Fesster!" screamed Caleb Rakestraw, digging a gun from holster with frantic haste. "No spook can bother us!"

With an insane squall, the berserk sea captain squeezed gun trigger. A bullet whistled past the Rio Kid's ear and tore adobe from the barn wall behind him.

Jule Fesster's guns were bucking and flaming in his hands then, as Captain Bob Pryor tripped gun-hammers. Converging slugs caught Caleb Rakestraw squarely in his tattooed chest, the impact of the tunneling lead knocking him off his feet.

Sitting his saddle alongside the Rio Kid, Celestino's Colts were thundering their death song. With Fesster's bullets bracketing him, the cool-nerved Mexican fired with cold precision, gunning down the black-coated gambler.

Blood spurted from bullet-holes hidden by Fesster's Dundreary whiskers. His knees unhinged, muscles turning to rubber. Then, pitching sideward like a ship's mast under a heavy gale, the Monterey gambler hit the ground and lay quivering, spirals of smoke spewing from the Colt, .45s in his dead hands.

"It's all over, Celestino," Bob Pryor sighed, swinging off Saber and holstering his hot-barreled guns. "The Silver of Satan must have had a curse on it. The men who tried to steal it came to a bloody end—every one of them, from Furtado on down."

PABLO came hobbling across the field toward them as they stood over the corpses of Rakestraw and Fesster. Staring off beyond the muleteer, the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles watched as the avenging Mexicans, having wiped out the last remnants of the *Dixie Queen's* pirate crew, boarded their bumboats and shoved off through the breakers toward their waiting ship.

The *Chapala* would sail back to Mexico without its silver cargo. The revolution which General Cabral Goularte had planned for Mexico had been nipped in the bud.

"We'll give yore mules a good rest, Pablo," Captain Pryor shouted to the deaf Mexican. "Then we'll run the Silver of Satan down to Santa Barbara and deposit it with the U.S. Army at the Presidio for safekeepin'."

Pablo grunted, giving them a toothless grin as he stared down at the two bodies.

"Esta muy bueno," he chuckled. "I weel burn candles of thanksgiving at the Mission altar for the *Dios* having spared my life thees day. . . . "

The Rio Kid and Celestino remained in Santa Barbara long enough to see that city's annual Spanish fiesta witness an unscheduled event in its program—the marriage of Senorita Janell Bach to Dwayne Jordan, the nuptials taking place in Santa Barbara's hallowed mission.

Then the two trail companions headed north, accompanying Silverado Stracy's stage-coach as far as San Luis Obispo. . . .

Two days later, Captain Bob Pryor and his Mexican partner in adventure stood before Colonel Jefferson Weatherby in the headquarters of the Monterey Presidio. With the commandante were ex-Senator Leland Stanford and ex-General John Charles Fremont.

"Our mission is completed, sir," Pryor reported. "Here is a receipt for the Silver of Satan. It should bring good luck to yore future Stanford University, Mr. Stanford."

General Fremont chuckled as he shook Pryor's hand.

"I'm glad," he said, "that you enjoyed Santa Barara. I found it a peaceful city back in Forty-six. I trust you found it the same."

The notes of a bugle sounding Assembly wafted through the open door of the orderly room. Corporal Diskin entered the headquarters room, grinning from ear to ear.

"The troops are ready to pass in review, sir," the corporal said, saluting.

Colonel Weatherby escorted Captain Pryor and Celestino Mireles out on the porch of the headquarters building. Drawn up on the parade ground in impressive military array was the entire cavalry battalion posted at the Presidio.

"A little send-off for you, Rio Kid," chuckled the commandante. "The boys want to wish you and Celestino well before you head for Fort Klamath to help with the Modoc uprising. It will please me if you two will take the salute from the parading troops, if you will."

Standing shoulder to shoulder, two paces ahead of Colonel Weatherby and the two distinguished California civilians, the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireless snapped to attention as the Presidio band broke into the stirring strains of the "Star Spangled Banner."

Further Exciting Exploits of the Rio Kid in

KING OF THE HIGHWAYS

By LEE E. WELLS

NEXT ISSUE'S FEATURED COMPLETE FRONTIER ACTION NOVEL

Rowdy was out in front, with Cleopatra rushing up

A Broken Bow Story

HIGH HOPE

THIS, Jimmie Reed reckoned, was his last chance. And because it meant so much to him, Jimmie's eyes were bright with excitement as he watched "Dude" Mulqueen saddle the bay mare. Folks around Broken Bow seemed to think Jimmie wasn't old enough to ride in the Sweepstakes, and for three years he had wanted to have a mount in the big race which was run each Fourth of July on the flats behind Mulqueen's Livery.

The first year it hadn't been so bad, because he hadn't known how it was to feel a horse fairly flying beneath him. But last year the Circle K Ranch had entered three horses in the Sweepstakes and had given him a job exercising one of them a week before the Fourth.

Jim, whose father had been the town drunkard until he died and whose mother worked as waitress at the Mansion House Hotel, had felt proud for the first time in his life. Really proud. He had felt like a king each time the Circle K foreman gave him a leg up to the little flat racing saddle on the brown gelding's back. Even though the horse didn't stand much show of winning, Jimmie had dreamed of miracles, and had told

Even When It Meant Saving His Blooded Bay

a half length behind, when Jim hit him again

HANDICAP

By L. ERNENWEIN

his mother he would buy her a fancy new dress with his share of the winnings.

"But they say at the hotel that the horse you're exercising hasn't got a chance," his mother had said worriedly. "And you're so young."

Jimmie had just grinned at her. Womenfolk, he knew, always looked on the worst side of things. Especially widow-women who had been married to drunkards. They seemed to think all men were just half-grown boys, and that boys weren't much more than babies.

"There's always a chance to win," he had told her. "Outsiders run faster'n favorites sometimes, which is what makes hoss-racin' so tol'able interestin'."

Yeah, he'd been happy those few days, Jimmie had. Happy as a lark. He had scarcely taken time to eat his breakfast, wanting to be the first one at Mulqueen's Livery in the mornings. Then, just before the big race, Jimmie's mount had been kicked by another horse and was so lame it had to be taken back to the barn. No one had noticed the sadness in Jimmie's eyes that day, nor how his throat was choked.

Colt, Jimmy Reed Wouldn't Throw a Race!

Now, as he stood at the bay mare's head while Mulqueen buckled the racing saddle's safety strap, Jim said eagerly:

"Cleo shore looks fit this mornin', Dude—fit enough to win."

MULQUEEN, who always wore his dust-peppered derby at a forty-five-degree angle, squirted tobacco juice into the hoof-pocked dust.

"She might have a chance agin them Fandango Hills hosses," he muttered. "But not if Jasper Slade brings in that Rowdy hoss he's been runnin' around Bowie and Willcox. They say Rowdy is just about the fastest thing in Arizona Territory."

"Mebbe Slade won't come here," Jimmie suggested, his eyes on three hard-running horses that came pounding down the race-track.

"Them's the Circle K racers," Mulqueen said, and watched them in the squint-eyed way of a man calculating speed without the aid of a stop-watch.

All three riders were crouched low above their mounts' withers, jockey fashion. It was a fine sight to see, Jimmie thought—three horses running head to head. A glorious sight—until one of them suddenly dropped back and quit cold, a hundred yards from the finish line.

"There's one less hoss in the Sweepstakes," Dude Mulqueen predicted. "That claybank colt is a danged quitter, just like I thought."

"Shorty" Smith brought the quitter colt up to the barn.

"My boss won't run this hide tomorrow, Dude," he said. "Which means I'll be free to ride yore mare, if yuh want me."

Just like that, it came. Right out of a clear sky. One moment Jim had high hopes of showing Dude how expertly he could ride the mare, had planned on making Cleopatra's last workout so good that Dude would want him to ride her in the race tomorrow. He had intended to keep Cleo on the rail all the way around the track, not letting her run out at the stretch turn as she liked to do. But now, looking at Mulqueen, Jimmie saw the satisfied smile on Dude's face.

"That'll be fine, Shorty," Dude said. "Unsaddle that crowbait colt and give Cleo a whirl."

Jimmie's heart sank. He looked down at Cleo's front hoofs, not seeing them at all. Nor the ground beneath them. All the other horses in the race already had lightweight cowboy riders from ranches roundabout Broken Bow. There wasn't a chance for him now.

Dude Mulqueen came up and patted Jimmie's shoulder.

"Sorry, son," he said. "But I told Shorty a month ago that he could ride the mare in case Circle K didn't need him. I'll pay you for the workout just the same."

Jimmie shook his head. What good was money, compared to the feeling a fellow got riding a fast horse?

"I didn't earn it," he muttered, and walked toward the rear door of the livery stable.

Just like a year ago, Jim thought dismally. Right up to the last day he'd had a chance. Then something always went haywire.

Jimmie met Shorty Smith coming out of the barn. The Circle K rider peered at him.

"You sick or somethin', kid?" he asked.

Jimmie nodded, and hurried into the barn's deep-shadowed runway. He was sick, all right. Sicker than seven poisoned pups.

As he walked slowly through the stable, Shaemus O'Shea and Fonso Mitchell hurried in from the sidewalk.

"Did Dude work Cleopatra already?" O'Shea asked.

Jimmie shook his head, glad that the two men went quickly past him on their way to the rear door. There would be a good-sized crowd out there at the track by now, eager to see how the horses ran in their final workout before the Sweepstakes. For even though the Sweepstakes purse amounted to only three hundred dollars there would be a lot of heavy betting tomorrow, especially with the railroad construction gangs added to the ranch crews that always came to town on the Fourth of July.

Yes, Jimmie reflected, there would be the biggest crowd that had ever attended a Broken Bow Sweepstakes. And instead of being one of the proud jockeys

riding a racer in the parade to the post, he would be a member of that crowd. On foot, watching a race.

When Jimmie passed the barbershop, "Close-Shave" Pelky asked:

How'd Dude's mare run this mornin'?"

"Don't know," Jimmie muttered. "Didn't wait to watch."

The barber eyed him narrowly. "Thought you was goin' to ride her."

"So did I," Jimmy said, "but Dude hired Shorty Smith."

And he could tell by the expression on Pelky's face that the barber thought Cleopatra would have a better chance of winning with Smith riding her tomorrow.

That was the worst part of it. Folks thinking he didn't have experience enough. He had done all right with the workouts, hadn't he? None of the horses had got away from him, or jumped out from under him at the start—like happened to that young O Bar B wrangler last year. How could they tell he wasn't good enough to ride in a race if they didn't give him a chance to show them?

JIMMIE walked fast along the sidewalk, wanting to get home before someone else asked him about the workouts. His mother would be there, for she didn't start work at the hotel until noon.

But it wouldn't be quite so hard a chore telling her. She was used to disappointments, knew all about such things. She had saved money to buy a nice cottage on Residential Avenue and had had nearly enough when the new railroad built into Broken Bow and caused a boom in real estate prices. So now they had to keep the crumbling old 'dobe house in Tin Can Alley.

When Jim saw Sheriff Sam Odegarde and Doc Plunkett sitting on the hotel veranda he started to cross the street, not wanting to answer any more questions. But Sheriff Sam called:

"Come here a minute, Jimmie."

The old lawman was about the best-liked man in Dragoon Basin and he hadn't forgotten how Jimmie helped save his life three weeks before by hitting "Ace-High" Halliday smack-dab in the forehead with a stone fired from a slingshot. Every time Sheriff Sam met Jimmie on the street he gave him a quarter to buy candy for himself and his two little sisters.

As Jim went reluctantly to the hotel veranda, Doc Plunkett, who'd been nicknamed "Parable" Plunkett long before Jimmie was born, asked:

"Why in the name of the bearded prophet are you so downcast and dejected, lad? You look sadder than six Sonora steers starving in a snowstorm."

Jimmie ignored the pompous old medico. "My ma says I'm not to take any more quarters, Sheriff Sam," he said to Odegarde. "She says yuh've bought us enough candy to last a year."

Odegarde chuckled. "That's not what I called you over for," he said smilingly. "It's about something you can use for a long, long time. And it'll never give yuh a stomach ache, either."

Jimmie wondered what the old lawman was talking about. The thought came to him that Sheriff Sam might possibly be referring to a gun—a Winchester, maybe. But how would the lawman know that was what he'd wanted for two Christmases?

"Ain't yuh a mite curious to know what it is?" Sheriff Sam asked secretively.

Jim nodded. If it *was* a Winchester he'd have to admit his mother was right about the power of prayer. Of course he'd only prayed for it the night before Christmas, but maybe this was the way such things worked out. Perhaps it was like his mother tried to explain when she would say, "If the things you ask for are right you'll get them, soon or late, if you just have faith."

Sheriff Sam winked at Doc Plunkett. "Mebbe I'd better keep it a secret for a spell," he said.

"By all means!" Parable declared. "It is universally understood and accepted by the most profund philosophers that anticipation is the very nectar of human existence. I might go so far as to proclaim that anticipation is the paramount pinnacle of pleasure—so supreme and palpitating an emotion that realization is dwarfed by comparison!"

Plunkett's declaration didn't make much sense to Jimmie Reed. Doc was a danged good sawbones, drunk or sober,

but he sure went haywire when he talked, and he had a tongue as limber as the lash of a jerkline driver's whip.

Sheriff Sam tugged thoughtfully at his down-swirling mustache. There was a twinkle in his faded eyes.

"Yuh reckon I'd better tell yuh now, Jimmie?"

"Yeah," Jim said. "I'd shore be pleasured to know."

"Well, it's like this, son. I was out to my daughter's ranch yesterday and they've got a dandy little stud colt, a long yearling that'll be ready to ride come calf roundup time. He's a blood-bay with black points and a perfect diamond on his forehead, and he's quartered up like he'll grow into a top-notch rope hoss. Of course there's no use to bring him in now, but I thought yuh'd like to know yuh'll have a pony of yore own to ride next spring."

A pony of his own!

"Gee!" Jimmie blurted, not knowing what else to say.

He had never even thought of asking for a colt, knowing there was no chance of buying one. His mother saved every cent that wasn't needed for food and clothes to put into the fruit jar toward buying their new house. But now, because Sheriff Sam was the kind of a man who believed in doing things with deeds instead of words, he would have a pony of his own—a blood-bay stud colt with black markings and good quarters!

All the way home Jimmie kept remembering how Sheriff Sam had described the colt. It made a picture in his mind, so that he could almost see the little stud. And it made him forget about not riding in the Sweepstakes—until his mother asked:

"What are you doing home so early?"

Then Jim remembered, and although he didn't know it, some of the smiling brightness faded from his eyes.

"Shorty Smith is ridin' Dude's mare," he told her.

HIS mother went on washing the breakfast dishes, not asking for details. Jimmie reckoned she didn't care, just so she wouldn't have to worry about him getting hurt. Women sure did a tolerable amount of worrying, one way and another. Especially widow-women.

Jimmie reached for the dish towel and started drying dishes while he told her about the blood-bay colt Sheriff Sam was going to give him, come calf roundup time.

"Why, Jimmie, that's elegant!" she exclaimed. "It's simply elegant!"

She looked real young when she smiled, Jimmie thought; almost girlish, sort of. The only trouble was she didn't smile often these days, what with the high cost of houses and everything.

"That colt'll probably be the best two-year-old in Dragoon Basin," Jim prophesied proudly. "From what Sheriff Sam said it'll grow into a high-class hoss by the time it's four."

"Good gracious!" his mother murmured thoughtfully, and he saw the worry wrinkles begin to show in her forehead.

That was a bad sign. It was the way she looked when he needed his boots half-soled, or his sisters needed new shoes. He wondered if the look had anything to do with him having a pony of his own.

"Shucks no," he thought. "It must be something else—some unpaid bill she's just remembered."

"Where would we keep the colt, son?" she asked.

Jimmie hadn't thought about that. You couldn't just tie a colt to the stoop railing when you lived in an alley.

"Mebbe I could make a dicker with Dude to keep it at the livery," he said.

"But that would cost cash money," his mother reminded. "And we haven't a penny to spare, son—not a penny."

Jimmie wiped a cup, over and over.

"I could build a corral somewheres out back," he finally said.

"But it takes money to feed a horse, son. Especially a growing colt, which has to have lots of good nourishing food so it can grow big and strong."

"Yeah," Jimmie agreed, and wiped the cup again.

They didn't talk for a long moment. Then his mother dried her hands on her apron. She put her arms around him and gave him a tight hug. Her voice sounded sort of like laughing and crying at the same time when she said:

"Perhaps we'll figure out a way, son

—but I'm blessed if I know how we can do it."

And neither did Jimmie. There was no way to keep a colt without feeding it. And there'd be no money to spend on hay or grain. That meant he couldn't have the colt. It made a bad feeling inside him—an all-gone feeling, like he'd had at the track when Dude said Shorty would ride the mare.

One of Jimmie's little sisters ran into the house to show her mother a horny toad she'd captured. Jim saw that she was wearing a new pink pinafore. It looked nice, and starchy clean, but you could tell it was home-made. Sally had never worn a store-bought dress, and neither had Helen. And they didn't get to play with the nice little girls who lived on Residential Avenue.

Jimmie was thinking about that as he took his slingshot from its peg near the kitchen door. It wouldn't be right for him to spend money feeding a colt when his sisters couldn't have even one dress apiece from the Mercantile.

"Where you going?" his mother inquired.

Jimmie shrugged. "Guess I'll go down to the livery and shoot some sparrows," he muttered. "They're gittin' tol'able bold since I been so busy exercisin' hosses."

But that wasn't the real reason Jimmie hurried toward Mulqueen's Livery. He wanted to hear how Cleopatra had run with Shorty Smith riding her. There was just an outside chance that the mare wouldn't cotton to Shorty, not being used to the Circle K cowboy. She was a notional critter, and took spells of acting skittish as a two-year-old filly. Dude had been throwing grain into her by the bucketful so she would have plenty of bottom for the hard training it took to bring a horse into racing condition.

"Supposin' she sulked on Shorty, or run wide with him at the stretch turn!" Jimmie thought.

If that happened Dude might change his mind. He might say, "Reckon we'd better let Jimmie ride her, bein' as she's used to him."

Jimmie grinned, savoring the pleasure that would give him. It made a good feeling just to think about it. And such a thing might happen Not likely, perhaps; but it *could* happen. And maybe it would.

He was almost running now. And cussing himself for not staying at the track. What if Cleopatra had got spunky and pitched Shorty off, and Dude had given Joe Blake, the O Bar B wrangler a try at her simply because Jimmie Reed had gone home?

WHEN he was almost to the barn Jimmie saw Smith walking toward him. For a moment, while he peered at Shorty's face to see if he looked downhearted, Jimmie hoped something had happened. But Smith didn't look sad at all, and he was sort of strutting along.

"How'd the mare run?" Jim asked.

"Slick," Shorty bragged. "Slicker'n cow slobbers. If it wasn't for that Rowdy hoss comin' here from Willcox she would win the Sweepstakes easy as a snake sheddin' its skin."

Jim was in no hurry now. You didn't have to rush in order to shoot sparrows. And that was all there was left for him to do at Mulqueen's Livery.

"It looks like Jasper Slade ain't comin," he said, not caring especially, one way or the other. "This is the last day for entries."

"He's comin', all right," Shorty reported. "Some cowboys from over Two Tanks way just rode in and said they passed Slade drivin' his buckboard, with Rowdy hitched behind it on a lead rope."

Which was when a startling thought came to Jimmie Reed. And a new hope.

"Yuh reckon Rowdy can beat Cleopatra and all them other hosses?" he asked.

"Rowdy will run off and hide on 'em," Smith predicted. He stepped to the barbershop doorway and said to Close-Shave Pelky, "I'll bet you a dollar against a shearin' that I bring Dude's mare in second to Rowdy tomorrow."

Second to Rowdy!

Jimmie glanced along Main Street, wanting to see if Slade's rig was in sight. There was a little plume of dust way out at the east end of town, but Jimmie couldn't see what was under it. He walked slowly to the stable, thinking about the new idea that had come to him. Jasper Slade was a big man, much

too heavy for race riding. He would have to hire a jockey, and there were only two lightweight riders left—Jimmie Reed and Joe Blake.

What a thing that would be, if he should get a chance to ride Rowdy! Everyone seemed to think Slade's horse was a brass-riveted cinch to win the Sweepstakes. And the winning owner usually gave his jockey ten per cent of the purse. Jimmie figured it out and finally decided that ten per cent of three hundred would be thirty dollars. Enough to buy a year's supply of hay and grain for the blood-bay colt!

Dude Mulqueen stood in the stable doorway talking to a stylishly garbed stranger who looked like he might be a big city sport. Leastwise he wore a diamond-studded horseshoe pin and had two cameo rings on his lily-white fingers.

"I think your mare will win tomorrow, regardless of the competition, Mulqueen," he said, "and I shall wager on her."

Then he lit a long black cigar and walked along the street like he owned the sidewalk.

"There goes a man that thinks he knows more about hosses than I do," Mulqueen said to Jimmie.

"He's got another think comin'," Jimmie declared, being positive that no one knew more about horses than the old liveryman. "What's his name?"

"Diamond Dan Drake, the Texas tinhorn who won hisself a saloon at Tombstone on the turn of a card—and lost it the same way. He's a real smart gambler and one of the slickest faro dealers in the country."

Jimmie didn't give a darn about Drake. He had something a lot more important to talk about.

"Shorty tells me Jasper Slade is on his way to town," he said.

"Yeah," Dude muttered. "Which means Cleo will probably get herself beat tomorrow, dang it all. It's took me five years to come by a hoss that has a good chance of beatin' the Circle K entries. I shore had high hopes of winnin' that three hundred—but not with Rowdy runnin'."

Jim felt a trifle sorry for Dude, but he couldn't help thinking what a comical thing it would be if he got to ride Rowdy and won the race. That would sure show folks how wrong they had been about him. It would be the greatest thing that had ever happened to him, Jimmie thought.

"I guess Mr. Slade will want to hire a rider," he said, "which means me, or Joe Blake, don't it, Dude?"

But Mulqueen shook his head. "Slade hires his jockey by the month, and totes him along to the different race-tracks."

Jimmie sighed. It looked like there just wasn't any use of a feller hoping at all. He picked up a pebble and aimed his slingshot at a sparrow.

"There comes Slade with his lightnin' rod racer taggin' along behind him!" Dude exclaimed.

JIMMIE stood wide-eyed as the red-wheeled buckboard, drawn by a pair of paint broncs, came slowly along Main Street. Jasper Slade slouched on the spring seat, acknowledging the greetings of acquaintances who called to him from the sidewalk. There was a brass-bound tack trunk, a lantern, and a couple buckets in the rig's narrow bed, but Jimmie didn't notice anything except the sorrel horse that followed the buckboard.

"Gosh!" Jimmie whispered, and gawked at Rowdy as if he'd never seen a horse before.

And he hadn't. Not a horse like Rowdy. Sunlight gave the stud's sleek coat a burnished copper shine. He moved along like he was floating on air, his stride so smooth and effortless that he scarcely seemed to lift his feet.

"A real daisy cutter," Jimmie thought, and when Slade pulled up in front of the stable, Jimmie peered at Rowdy's fine shaped head.

It was sure a sight to see. Small, sharp-pointed ears; plenty of breadth between bright, knowing eyes; wide-flared nostrils and a mouth that looked colt-little compared to the bulging jaws above it.

Jimmie walked around the stud and back again, looking at the good, flat bone in his legs, calculating the strength of his well-muscled quarters.

"He's shore built to run," Jim said admiringly.

The two men were talking, but Jimmie didn't pay much attention until he heard Slade say:

"My jockey got sick on me—had to leave him in Tombstone. Yuh know of a good rider I could hire?"

Jim could scarcely believe his ears. He stood stock-still and peered at Mulqueen, watched Dude nudge back his battered derby and scratch his head.

It seemed like a tolerable long time before Dude said:

"Most of our lightweight riders has already been hired."

Jimmie shook his slingshot, wanting to attract Dude's attention. But Mulqueen didn't look at him. The liveryman scratched his head again.

"In fact every danged one of 'em's been hired," he said.

Jimmie coughed. Whereupon Mulqueen glanced at him.

"All except one," he said to Slade.

Even then Jim couldn't be sure. "Mebbe Dude means Joe Blake, the O Bar B wrangler!" he thought.

"What's his name?" Slade asked. "And where can I get aholt of him?"

Jimmie held his breath. He had never seen much sense in praying except at Christmas time, and even then it didn't seem to do much good. Leastwise, it never had fixed it so he got a Winchester rifle. But now, in the brief moment before Mulqueen spoke, Jimmie prayed hard.

"Why," Dude said smilingly, "the boy's name is Jimmie Reed and he's standin' right there betwixt you and the hoss."

A long sigh slid from Jimmie's lips. He saw the sharp-eyed way Jasper Slade looked him over.

"About a hundred pounds, ain't yuh?" Slade asked.

Jimmie nodded. He stood tight-lipped while Slade looked at his hands, and arms, and legs. It would be awful, Jim thought worriedly, if Slade turned him down now.

"You don't look very strong in the arms," Slade said.

He reached out and felt of Jimmie's muscle. "It takes a strong boy to handle Rowdy at the post, and to pull him up at the finish," he muttered. "He's a ridge-runnin' fool, that hoss. He'd keep right on goin' and ruin hisself, if yuh'd let him."

Jimmie thought he had better say something that would make Slade think he was strong enough, even if he had to tell a whopper.

"I'm lots stronger than I look, Mr. Slade," he said. "I've handled some real salty ones, ain't I, Dude?"

Mulqueen nodded. "He rides tol'able good for his age."

"Then why didn't some of these local owners hire him?" Slade demanded.

Which was, Jimmie realized, a difficult question to answer.

Dude nudged back his derby. He scratched his head, and grinned at Jimmie.

"I guess he's got us there, eh son?" he said.

Jimmie nodded. All the high gladness ran out of him. Jasper Slade was a real smart man. You could tell that by looking at him. His greenish gray eyes were as sharp as splintered glass. No use telling him any whoppers. He would see right through them.

Then Slade looked Jimmie in the eye and asked:

"Are you a boy that can listen to orders, and ride my hoss exactly like I say?"

"Yes sir!" Jimmie declared. "I shore will. I'll do everything just like yuh tell me!"

"Then yuh're hired," Slade said.

JUST three short words. Not fancy words, like Parable Plunkett used. Just simple, everyday words. But they made music in Jimmie's ears. Such glorious music that he blinked his eyes, and gulped, and stood speechless with pleasure. It didn't seem real, somehow, that he was going to ride Rowdy, the fastest horse of them all.

"Would yuh like for me to give him a workout this afternoon?" he asked, real polite.

Slade shook his head. "Rowdy got all the exercise he needs gettin' here. You just be on hand at saddlin' time tomorrow afternoon."

Jimmie Reed was so excited he could scarcely sit still long enough to eat his supper. Everyone seemed impressed by the glorious thing that had happened to

him. His mother acted downright prideful about it, and even his little sisters looked at him like he was a grown-up man. He went back to the livery right after supper and when it got so dark in the barn he couldn't see Rowdy, he sat in front of the sorrel's stall, listening to him munch hay.

Dude Mulqueen came in from the doorway bench.

"Yuh shore got a case on that stud, ain't yuh, son?" he said.

"Yeah," Jimmie admitted. "I like to listen to him eat."

Dude chuckled. "I don't blame yuh for likin' him. He's got thoroughbred blood in him that goes all the way back to the Byerly Turk and the Darley Arabian. He's bred to run his heart out for any galoot that'll feed him." Then Mulqueen added, "If yuh're goin' to hang around for a spell I'll go over to the Alhambra and hear what the boys are sayin' about the bettin' tomorrow. Keep an eye on things."

"Shore," Jim agreed.

Main Street was crowded with people tonight, but it was quiet in here. Just the soft sound of horses rustling hay in mangers, and the occasional stomping of a hoof. Barns, Jimmie reflected, were sure nice places. He liked the good smell of horses and hay and leather.

After a while Jimmie heard footsteps in the stable doorway and caught a vague glimpse of two men who came part way down the barn. They stood in the deep shadows.

"I won't have any trouble placing plenty of bets," one of them said. "But I don't like the idea of risking all that money with a green kid up on Rowdy."

The voice sounded familiar to Jim, but he couldn't place it until he heard Jasper Slade's voice.

This'll work out just as good, Dan. The kid ain't strong enough to pull him," Slade said, "but he can swing a bat—and you know what whippin' does to Rowdy. The stud'll quit cold, which means Mulqueen's mare is a cinch to win."

That didn't make sense to Jimmie Reed. What in tunket did Slade mean? He sounded like he *wanted* Rowdy to lose!

Then, as Diamond Dan Drake said, "If it works we'll clean up a small fortune," Jimmie understood what they meant.

Slade and Drake were in cahoots. Slade was scheming to have Rowdy lose, knowing that most folks wouldn't bet against the stud, and so Slade couldn't win near as much betting on Rowdy as he could by betting on Cleopatra. Drake and Slade were partners in a crooked gambling deal!

They went back to the street and Jimmie sat for a long time, wondering what he should do. If he told Dude about the deal there'd be trouble, and he wouldn't get to ride in the race at all. That, Jimmie thought, would be awful. It would be better to lose the race, if that's what Slade wanted.

It occurred to him then that he had promised to ride Rowdy exactly like Slade told him.

Jimmie was thinking about that when Dude came back. He didn't tell Dude what he had overheard, but he thought about it long after he went to bed. A feller had to keep his word, even if it meant losing a race. Only it sure seemed like a dirty trick to play on Rowdy. That was the part Jim didn't like—doublecrossing a good thoroughbred that had the blood of famous racers in his veins.

It was way past midnight when Jim finally fell asleep. And because his mother wanted him to be in tiptop condition for the race, she didn't call him for breakfast. So it was almost noon when Jimmie awoke.

"This is your big day," Jim's mother told him when he left the old adobe house in Tin Can Alley. "I'll be rooting for you, son, and praying for you too."

"A lot of good that'll do," Jim thought dismally as he walked to the stable.

The sun was shining and folks were shooting off firecrackers on Main Street and everyone seemed happy as larks. But not Jimmie Reed. He felt downright miserable, until he saw Jasper Slade.

"If yuh do just like I say," Jasper Slade said, "I'll give yuh fifty dollars after the race, win or lose."

FIFTY DOLLARS! Why, that would be more than enough to take care of the blood-bay colt. It meant that he

could have a pony of his own, come calf roundup time.

"Yuh hear, kid—win or lose?" Slade declared.

Jimmie nodded.

"All yuh got to do is use this," Slade said and handed him a short whip. "Soon as the flag drops start wallopin' Rowdy with this bat, and keep at it all the way."

Jimmie didn't feel so good then. The whip felt heavy in his hand. He glanced at Rowdy, seeing the friendly look in the stud's soft, warm eyes. Rowdy held his head real proud, arching his neck and pawing, as if to say, "Come on kid—I'm ready to win."

"Yuh listenin' to what I say?" Slade demanded crankily.

Jimmie nodded again, and saw Diamond Dan Drake standing near the judges stand, making bets. The gambler, Jim guessed, was taking bets on Rowdy to win, knowing dang well that the race was fixed. And Drake was probably betting on Cleopatra besides, which would make it a double cleanup if Dude's mare won.

Slade gave Jimmie a leg up. "Don't forget what I said," he warned. "Wallop him all the way."

"Give that stud a good ride!" a man in the crowd called.

And Jimmie's mother waved to him as he rode out onto the track in Number One position, leading the parade to the post. The Odd Fellows Band struck up a lively tune and it was just like Jimmie had dreamed about. The big crowd of people, the bright flags waving, the good smell of horse sweat and leather. But because he couldn't forget the whip in his hand, and what it was meant for, Jimmie didn't feel proud at all. He felt ashamed.

It was a matter of minutes until the eight-horse field was lined up at the starting post where Fonso Mitchell stood with a flag. There were three horses between Rowdy and Cleopatra, but they didn't count in Jimmie's estimation. This race was strictly a two-horse affair. All Rowdy had to do was beat Dude's mare and he would win. But he wouldn't beat her under the whip, and if Jimmie didn't use the whip Slade wouldn't even give him ten per cent of the purse.

Rowdy stood like a gentleman, his bunched muscles quivering. His sharp, small ears were cocked as if listening for the word to go. He didn't need a whip to make him run. He would race his heart out just because he was proud. And that, Jimmie guessed, was why he would quit under the whip. It hurt his pride.

The flag dropped and a great shout came from the crowd:

"They're off!"

But the shout sounded faint and far away to Jimmie Reed. Rowdy started with a hurtling leap so swift and violent that Jim slipped back in saddle a trifle despite the handful of mane he had grasped. Then, because he had to do it in order to have a pony of his own, Jim gritted his teeth and hit Rowdy with the whip.

The sorrel was running head to head with a Circle K gelding when it happened. His ears twitched and he faltered in stride, as if that single slash of the whip had astonished him. But even then he drew away from the gelding and was out in front, with Cleopatra rushing up a half length behind, when Jim hit him again.

Rowdy slowed his hurtling pace at once. His ears came back and he turned his head, as if watching to see when the whip would fall again. Cleopatra was gaining now. In another three strides she was lapped on Rowdy and Jim caught a glimpse of Shorty Smith's tense face, heard him pleading with the bay mare:

"Run at him, honey! Run at him!"

And she was doing just that.

Dude's mare was out in front by almost a full length when Jimmie Reed loosed a choking sob and flung the whip away.

It was too late, he guessed. But he crouched low over Rowdy's sweat-lathered withers and called:

"Go get her, race hoss—please go get her!"

For a moment then, as two other horses charged up beside the sorrel, Jimmie didn't think there was a chance. Even though Rowdy was now running like a wild horse, he had lost too much ground. But Jim kept trying, kept plead-

ing with the stud, kept hand-riding him the way Dude had taught him to do.

ROWDY was stretched out now, running so close to the ground that his nose seemed to skim the dust. And he was gaining on Cleopatra, inch by inch, until his head was up to her saddle cloth, until Jimmie was even with Shorty Smith. Then, with less than a dozen strides to go, the sorrel stud pushed his wide-flaring nostrils out in front, and finishing with a tremendous burst of speed, beat Cleopatra to the wire by a neck!

Jimmie Reed didn't pay much attention to the shouting. He brought Rowdy back to the winner's circle and tried not to meet Jasper Slade's eyes as he dismounted.

"What happened?" Slade demanded wrathfully.

"I—I dropped the whip by accident," Jimmie lied.

Slade cursed as he took Rowdy's reins. "I'm not payin' yuh a penny," he snarled. "Not a penny!"

Jimmie shrugged, and walked away. He felt sort of sad, knowing he had deliberately thrown away a sure chance to own the blood-bay colt. But not so sad as if he had cheated Rowdy out of winning the sweepstakes. A good horse like that deserved to win.

Then, as Jimmie saw his mother come running toward him, he stopped and stared in astonishment. She held a wad of dollar bills in her hand.

"I knew you'd win, Jimmie—I just knew it!" she called excitedly.

Jim gawked at her. "Where'd yuh get all the money?" he demanded.

"I bet our house savings on Rowdy to win," she told him happily, "and won enough to buy that house on Residential Avenue."

Jimmie gulped, and thinking how close he had come to making Rowdy lose, shivered a little. If Rowdy hadn't won his mother would've lost all that money she had saved in the fruit jar for so long.

Then, as she hugged him, he heard her say: "There'll be enough left over to feed your colt, son—more than enough."

Whereupon Jimmie swallowed hard, and blinked away the salty wetness in his eyes.

"Gee, Ma, that's elegant!" he exclaimed.

"We'll Cross this Ferry, Come Hell or High Water—and Yuh Better Not Try to Stop Us!"

BOB PRYOR spoke in no uncertain tones as he defied the guards hired by King Baker to exact heavy tribute from all travelers.

"Blast him, boys!" shouted one of the guards.

"Oh, no!" Pryor's pard Celestino laughed. "One little move toward the seex, amigos, and you veesit el diablo!"

Celestino grinned at them, his gun held steady. One of the men made a swift grab for his weapon. Instantly Celestino's Colt moved a little—and belched flame. The man grabbed his shattered fingers with a howl of pain, and his gun dropped to the dust.

"Anybody else?" Celestino invited. No one moved.

Another renegade tried to fire. The Rio Kid got the drop on him and ordered: "Throw yore guns in, gents, and line up against the wall. We're crossing!"

The toll keeper's fists were doubled. "You'll hear about this, gents! Ain't no one bucks King Baker—and lives to tell about it!"

But that's just what the Rio Kid does—bucks King Baker, the gun boss of Montana, and lives to tell about it! The whole story's told in KING OF THE HIGHWAYS, by Lee E. Wells, next issue's action-packed complete novel of the frontier—one of the most exciting and colorful yarns in years! Look forward to a humdinger crowded with rip-roaring action from start to finish!

"Git, Wilson!" Sam said softly. "Before I drill a hole in yuh!"

SHIFTLESS MAN

By RICHARD BRISTER

Lazy Sam Anderson was Sage Center's worst problem—but he proved himself a ring-tailed whizzer at snagging an outlaw!

SAM ANDERSON was a shiftless, lazy-natured cuss, and he didn't go out of his way to hide his lazy streak from his neighbors. The sun always hung mighty high in the sky over Iron Mountain before Sam rolled out of his untidy bunk, wiped the sleep sand out of his gentle blue eyes, and set about fixing his simple breakfast of eggs, bacon, and steaming black coffee.

Sam never bothered to clean up his dishes, or to tidy his little frame house. But every once in a while he'd give Widow Green three dollars to come over and do a house cleaning for him.

After breakfast, Sam generally spent

his time on the rickety porch in his squeaky old rocker, puffing away on a beat-up old briar. Around noon, he'd mosey along into town—a tall, gangly man about thirty-three with a wide mouth that always seemed to be smiling at some secret joke—and he'd buy himself lunch at Chinese Charley's Chophouse. Sam figured it wasn't worth the trouble to cook for himself past breakfast.

"After all," he'd grin over his pool cue, as he leaned his lank frame over the billiard table in Pop Burnside's Recreation, where by the way, you could usually find Sam, afternoons, "I wouldn't save myself much more'n three, four dollars a week, cookin' my own lunches and dinners. 'Tain't worth the bother, the way I look at it."

"I declare, Sam," Pop Burnside would gasp, wagging his white head at Sam in open-mouthed mystification, "if you ain't the laziest feller!"

"I'm lazy," Sam would grin back, all the while dropping balls in side and corner pockets with the relaxed skill that came of daily practise. "Never denied it."

"Someday you're goin' to run out of ready cash," Pop grumbled righteously. "You won't be able to buy your meals at Charley's, nor hire the Widder Green to clean up after you, out to your house. You mark my words, Sam, no man can live off the fat of the land forever. I ain't pokin' my nose into your finances, but I don't reckon you got so much you won't hit the bottom of the barrel some time. When that time comes, it'll be go to work or starve, for you, Sam. And the shiftless life you been leadin', I ain't just sure you'll take to earnin' your livin' so easy."

Sam squinted along his tapered cue, chuckling softly. "Bust my britches if you ain't soundin' off just like a bluenose sky pilot, Pop. I always knowed the rest of the town was up in arms agi'n me for livin' so easy, but I never figgered you to turn on me."

THE sleepy little town of Sage Center was inhabited for the most part by sober-minded, industrious Yankees, who had stopped off here a generation back and built themselves a town to order, at the junction of the railroad and the cattle drovers' main trail toward the north.

The town had retained much of the old New England flavor, and the sober-minded elders who considered an honest day's work the be-all and end-all of existence, had no use for Sam's listless manner of living. They frowned constantly on him, but Sam just shrugged off the frowns like so many raindrops.

The plain fact was, he enjoyed their critical glances. He'd bet his best pair of boots against a lead nickel that these hard-shelled, grimly industrious townsfolk were actually jealous of him. All of which made Sam's total inactivity that much more gratifying.

"Lookee here, Pop," Sam said to the white-haired oldster. "If you'll promise to keep this to yourself, I'll explain how come I'm livin' such a shiftless sort of existence. But mind now, this ain't to go past you."

Pop Burnside nodded soberly. He had a reputation as a close-mouthed codger, once he'd given his promise.

"Go ahead, Sam. I reckon you're talkin'."

"Well," Sam grinned sheepishly, "fact is, I ain't entirely shiftless, like it appears on the surface. I worked like a six-legged mule, afore I settled down here in Sage. I mean that, so don't squint them old eyes like you disbelieve, Pop, till you've heard the whole story."

"I'm listenin', Sam."

"Well, to begin with, I growed up on a farm in Kaintuck. Far back as I can remember into my boyhood, my Old Man used to fan my britches and keep me workin' every day, sun-up till sun-down. And never give me so much as a red cent spendin' money, neither. Long about when I was eighteen, I seen there wasn't nothin' but to run out or git worked right down to the ground like a wore-out old dray horse.

"So I run away and come West. J'ined up with a party of Forty-Niners. Staked me out a claim out in Californy and worked my skin to the bone for nine solid years, pannin' gold dust. Day and night, I'm talkin' about, Pop, takin' time off just for eatin' and sleepin'. About the time I'd worked my claim out, I figgered I'd done mighty near enough brute work to last a normal man out for his life-time.

"I had me a sack full of dust. It come pretty near twelve thousand dollars. So I hit a shuck out of the diggin's, took me a train to New York, and blowed in about three thousand in three months, makin' up for the good times I never had no chance to enjoy up till then."

"A thousand dollars a month!" Pop gasped. "Son, you really must've gone haywire." He shrugged. "But I reckon you'll say it was worth it."

"Nope," Sam shook his head. "Three months of funnin' around the big city showed me one thing for sure. That wasn't the kind of pleasure I wanted. What I really wanted, all along, was a chance to take things real easy, to drift along from one day to the next like the birds, not workin' a lick, gettin' the sweat out of my eyes for good. Just plain loafin', I guess you'd call it."

"I would. But I can't say's I blame you, son. Thing is, this town never knowed nothin' about you, where you come from where you got the money to take life so easy. There's been rumors around that you stole that money that you come to live here quiet-like in Sage Center for a hideout." The old man chuckled. "Don't it just go to show you? There's folks in town sayin' you've got upwards of fifty thousand stashed somewheres out to your house. All because you never banked that money, and started folks guessin' just how much you was wuth."

"Let 'em guess." Sam chuckled softly. Part of his pleasure in this lazy man's life he was leading came from grinning into the teeth of this town's disapproval. It amused him hugely to learn that the town thought he was worth fifty thousand dollars. He had never even seen that much money. Nor would he ever, he told himself grimly. He would never be willing to work like a slave again, he had decided. The time would come when he would have to work for his living, he knew, but Sam Anderson would never kill himself trying to pile up a fortune.

POP BURNSIDE was looking soberly at him.

"Well, son," he said, "I'm right glad you finally busted down and told me the story. For my ownself, I've always sorty liked you, Sam. I'll keep mum about this, 'though it seems kind of a shame the whole town don't know how you 'pear to be so all-fired lazy."

"Don't worry about it, Pop," Sam grinned. He paid for the pool game, racked up his cue and walked out onto the board walk. He almost bumped into big, florid-faced Jasper Wilson.

"Howdy, Jasper," Sam drawled pleasantly, and proffered his hand to the husky young fellow. Wilson ran the only blacksmith shop in Sage Center. He had more business than he could handle, though he worked twelve hours daily, and several times he had pointedly offered Sam a job as helper. He had not taken it kindly when Sam turned down the offers, for there was a shortage of manpower in Sage Center, and young Wilson had a lot of Yankee righteousness in him.

He stood now with his hands thrust deep in his grimy pockets, ignoring Sam's proffered hand.

"I'm still short-handed down at the smithy, Anderson, if you're interested," he announced coldly.

"Ain't," Sam chuckled blithely. He was enjoying the moment. Living the lazy life was still a daily joy to him, but a chance like this, to turn down a bona-fide offer of work, was a sheer delight. It helped to make up for some of the grueling years Sam had put in as a boy on the farm back in Kentucky.

"You act as if you're plumb proud of bein' a no-good loafer," Jasper Wilson sneered.

Sam felt anger sliding along his cheeks and his fingers curled slowly. He was not easily riled, but someday this Jasper Wilson would go too far. Still, he didn't want trouble. He laughed off Wilson's remark.

"Not proud," he allowed. "But I'm sure contented."

"You're the only man in Sage Center under eighty years old," said the slab-muscled young blacksmith, "who don't work for his livin'. How long do you figger you can keep it up, anyway, Anderson?"

"I reckon that'd be my business," said Sam slowly.

"No." Jasper Wilson's thin mouth looked sullen. "That's where you're wrong. There ain't enough men to fill

all the jobs to be done in this town, and you know it. S'pose everybody acted like you do, Anderson. Just left off workin' becuz they was too blame lazy to move."

"S'posin' is easy," said Sam, smiling gently. "That ain't goin' to happen, so why talk about it?"

"It might happen. If it did, your money wouldn't be no good to you, Anderson. Chinese Charley wouldn't serve you your meals, and the Widow Green wouldn't clean your house for yuh, and you'd have to start lookin' out for yourself some, like anyone else. You ask me, it'd be a good thing if somebody stole that money you got stashed out to your place, so you'd be forced to act the part of a man."

"Nobody," said Sam, getting edgy, "was askin' for your opinion, Jasper."

He stood an inch taller than the swarthy young blacksmith but Jasper had forty pounds the advantage in weight. Jasper scowled.

"Don't tell me a no-account loafer like you's got his pride, Anderson. You act almost like you had some fight in you."

"If anybody was lookin' to find out, right pronto," purred Sam gently, "I might be obligin'."

Jasper Wilson laughed shortly. His dark eyes gleamed with sudden anticipation. He unbuttoned his black coat and removed it slowly.

"You mean you got the gumption to put your fists up ag'in me? Man alive, I been waitin' to give you a taste of my knuckles. You're certain sure a fight ain't too much like work?"

Sam stood there, a fighting grin on his lean face.

"Fightin'," he drawled, "ain't exactly called work, Wilson. Leastways, not where I hail from. I figger fightin's a pleasure." He laughed shortly, falling into a boxer's stance. "Come get it, son, if you're still minded thataway."

Jasper Wilson looked startled. The smile on Sam's face had the husky young blacksmith guessing. He came on though, snaking his left hand clumsily forward. He was all bull strength, and devoid of stealth. Sam's left hand darted out, snakelike, and smacked the young fellow squarely upon the chin.

WILSON went back on his heels, waving his arms out to retain his lost balance. The blow had left a red gash on his jaw, and it must have stung plenty, for he put a hand to it, cursing wildly.

Then he came at Sam in a bull rush, both hands flailing. Sam stepped aside nimbly, set himself, and slapped the man hard on the ear as he passed. When Wilson turned clumsily, Sam was ready and waiting. He pulled a vicious right up from the ground, and smashed the cocky young blacksmith's nose in.

Blood flowed freely from Wilson's nose, and he roared with impotent rage. His stentorian bellows drifted up and down the sleepy main street of Sage Center, and before long an excited crowd was gathering around the two gladiators. Sentiment was all on Wilson's side, naturally. The townspeople had precious little use for shiftless Sam Anderson to start with, and they cheered Jasper Wilson on lustily.

"Get him, Jasp!"

"Trip him, son. Git him down and throw a hammerlock onto the lazy son!"

Wilson's eyes gleamed with new hope, and he came forward in a crouch now. He was hurt. Sam's flying fists had carved the younger man's face to ribbons, and the big fellow was staggered. But if he could close with Sam, turn this struggle into a wrestling fracas, his superior weight would tell the final story. Wilson and Sam were both well aware of it.

Sam ducked away lightly as Wilson made a savage lunge at him. Sam cocked his right and put all of his lank body behind a savage blow to the point of the chin. Wilson's head snapped back. His eyes glazed, his arms dropped limply, and he fell to the dusty street like a sack of corn meal.

He lay sprawled grotesquely, one arm folded awkwardly under his thick body. His eyes were closed, and he seemed to be just barely breathing. The fight, quite plainly, was finished as quickly as it had started.

Sam went back into Pop Burnside's place to clean himself up. He was perspiring freely, and he was breathing hard, but the happy light of battle still had not left his blue eyes. Pop Burn-

side clucked unhappily at him.

"Ain't you jest full of surprises? You sure made him look like an easy mark, son. But I don't like it."

"No? Why not, Pop?"

"Jasper ain't goin' to take this layin' down. He'll git back at you, Sam. Jasper throws a lot of weight in this town, for such a young feller. He'll turn some trick over on you, mark my word. You got to realize the hull town's lined up solid ag'in you, to start with."

"And you figger Jasper'll turn 'em even more that way. Right, Pop?"

"I reckon that's about the size of it."

"Forget it," Sam said blithely. "Don't worry your mind about it, Pop. A man can git along all right with his neighbors anywheres, the way I look at it, so long as he minds his own business. I don't figger Jasper'll make me any big trouble."

"Jest the same," Pop Burnside said anxiously, "you keep a sharp eye out for trouble, Sam. Mark my words, you ain't seen the last of this mix-up with young Jasper."

The old man was a prophet, but it took two months to prove it. For two months, Sam went along living the life of Riley, as usual, just taking things easy. Jasper Wilson refused to speak to him on the street, but the young fellow seemed to take out all his burning hatred for Sam in mere ugly looks. Sam laughed silently, and refused to worry.

And then came the night when Jasper Wilson led a delegation of townsmen out to Sam's ramshackle house. The men were all mounted, all armed to the teeth, and Sam ranged himself warily in the doorway, when he heard Jasper's strident voice hail him.

"What's the idea," he asked mildly, eyeing first one grim-faced rider and then another, "of roustin' a man out of bed when he's takin' a nap through the cool of the evenin'?"

JASPER WILSON reined up sharply on his grazing mount.

"This here's a posse, Anderson," he announced.

"Posse? Fer why?"

"If you wasn't so all-fired busy nappin', you'd of heard how Rake Ballinger come snakin' into town, this afternoon, and held up Uncle Joe Portney's Dry Goods for fifty dollars worth of eatin' staples. Uncle Joe tried to throw down on him whilst he was high-tailin', and Rake put a slug through Uncle Joe's shoulder."

"That right?" Sam said, not changing expression.

"Rake" Ballinger was the last of the notorious Jesse Tarp gang that used to operate from a perfect hide-out, a robbers' roost in Iron Mountain that the law had never discovered.

Most of the owlhooter gang had been killed trying to rob a Fargo Express some years back. Rake had got away, after killing two railroad employees, and the incensed railroad officials had pledged themselves to a ten-thousand-dollar reward for his capture, dead or alive.

"I reckon you fellers're wastin' good time, ain't you, standin' here jawin'?" Sam allowed.

"We figger this here's one job you ain't goin' to duck out of, Anderson," Jasper Wilson said pointedly. "Rake's a threat to the safety of the hull town, an' I reckon every able-bodied man had ought to jine up with the posse."

Sam was tempted. The prospect of joining the manhunt was pleasant, for he had always liked a touch of excitement in his life. But he didn't like the sneering tone of voice Jasper Wilson was using on him. He just didn't like Jasper Wilson. The young blacksmith had a triumphant gleam in his eyes, as if he figured he had Sam cornered.

"I reckon," said Sam, "you got another reckon comin', Jasper."

Wilson froze in the saddle. "Y' mean, you ain't comin' with us? You're refusin'?" He sputtered something mean and ugly under his breath and turned to the others. "How long are we goin' to put up with this kind of nonsense from Anderson, men? You ask me, he's no blame use to this town atall."

Murmurs of approval, and Jasper's voice turned strident.

"Look at this house." He waved at the unpainted frame shack Sam lived in. Ivy ran helter-skelter up the porch posts and even across the windows. On the porch, several slats were missing. Sam kept threatening to fix the porch all the

time, but never quite got around to it.

Out in the disreputable yard was a well which Sam had started to dig for himself last spring, so as not to have to haul in his water from town. He'd got down about six feet so far, digging just a shovelful now and then, when the mood was on him.

"Look at that," sneered Jasper Wilson, waving at the round hole in Sam's yard. "If this place ain't a screechin' example of complete shiftlessness, I never seen one. It's a black mark on the town, that's what. You ask me, we ought to tar 'n' feather this lazy son, and tote him out of Sage on a fence rail."

Sam's gentle eyes turned hard as agate. He reached inside the door for his Sharps .30-.30 and pointed it straight at young Wilson's abdomen.

"Git," he said softly. "Git, Wilson, before I drill an air hole into yuh." He jerked the gun threateningly, and Wilson turned pale.

He reined his horse around slowly. "You ain't heard the last of this, Anderson," he flung back over one shoulder. "This about finishes you in our town, to my way of thinkin'. We'll take care of you later. All right, come on, men." He jabbed spurs into his mount, and the beast leaped forward.

Sam watched grimly as the posse rode away. He felt kind of sad. Nothing would have pleased him more than to join that bunch of bounty hunters. Of course, he couldn't resist baiting the arrogant Wilson. As things had panned out, Wilson had trapped him, turned the whole town actively against him, now. It was going to go hard with Sam when the manhunt was over. He had carried his lazy act a mite too far for human endurance, this time.

He sighed deeply, and even thought of saddling old Jenny and taking out after the posse. Then he scowled. He realized it was too late for that now. He went into the house and stretched out on his bunk. Usually, he felt warm and good inside, lazy times like this, but somehow there was no pleasure in it now. He dropped off into a fitful slumber, and dreamed fond dreams of capturing Rake Ballinger singlehanded, of dragging the outlaw down Sage Center's main street feet foremost, and of thumbing his nose at a thwarted, red-faced Jasper Wilson.

HE HAD no idea how long he had slept when some sixth sense of danger brought him bolt upright on his bunk. He heard the sound of heavy breathing across the room from him, and he reached under his pillow for his six-shooter. He was too late, though. A gruff, rumbling voice grunted harshly through the darkness.

"One more inch, Anderson, and I'll blow your brains all over them blankets. Now, s'pose you jest put them hands up, slowlike and easy."

Sam gulped and lifted his hands. There was the rasping sound of a striking match. Flame flared up across the small room, and a burly, black-bearded giant with vicious small eyes squinted at him with cruel amusement. The man held a gaping six-sun trained on Sam's chest as he applied the flame to Sam's coal oil lamp.

"Now, that's right sensible of you," the man grunted. "Stay sensible, and you may live to tell how Rake Ballinger spared your life."

"Rake Ballinger!" Sam gulped.

"That's me," grinned the outlaw. His gimlet eyes narrowed. "There's rumors around, Anderson, that says you got a sizable fortune stashed around here, some place. Me, I'm in trouble. I got to git far away from these parts, and I figger that money of yourn'd make me jest the South America stake I'm aneedin'. Savvy?"

Sam shook his head numbly. "That was just rumors, Ballinger. Fact is, I don't have much money."

The gun in Rake Ballinger's hand jerked upward, and Sam could see the skin whiten as the outlaw exerted finger pressure against the trigger.

"I ain't got time for no nonsense, Anderson. Lead me to that money, right pronto."

Sweat was popping out in small globules on Sam Anderson's forehead. He knew Rake Ballinger's reputation as a ruthless killer, knew by how slender a threat his own life was now suspended. He sighed deeply, and stood up.

"Reckon you're holdin' ace cards," he admitted glumly. And as an after-

thought, "It's plumb dark outside. Better tote along that coal oil lamp."

The outlaw sniggered. "Take me for a tarnation fool, do you? Figger I'm goin' to self-advertise my presence, with the hull town lookin' out for me." He held the gun steadily on Sam, picked up the lamp, and walked around behind Sam. He stuck the gun hard into Sam's backbone, then blew out the light.

"Start leadin' the way to that money, Anderson. One queer move and I'm yankin' this trigger."

"Suit yourself," Sam sighed softly. Walking carefully, he went through the door and down the porch steps. There was no moon. The night was pitch black. He went across the yard toward the cottonwood tree out by the east border, stepping gingerly, holding his breath against the pressure of that threatening gun muzzle.

"Money's buried alongside of that old tree," he admitted sadly.

He heard the outlaw's greedy chuckle. Sam smiled tightly, counting his steps in the darkness. When he figured he was only one step more from that unfinished well he'd been digging himself since last Spring, he took a sudden leap forward and flung himself face down on the ground.

"Hey!" blustered the outlaw. "Y' tarnation idiot, you're askin' for it!" Rake Ballinger raced forward eagerly and his gun crashed, splitting the darkness with orange flame.

As Sam sprawled and rolled at the other side of the open hole in the ground, the cursing outlaw plunged down into the pit abruptly. Sam rolled back, grasped the startled owlhooter's gun arm in a vise grip, and wrested the gun away from him. He lifted the gun high over his head and slammed it down, butt foremost.

He heard bone crunch, heard the man groan in agony, and swear violently in the darkness. Sam lifted the gun high again and snapped the butt downward. This time he hit the man's skull a solid blow, and he heard the outlaw drop down to the well bottom limply.

Sam listened quietly for half a moment, but there was no sound from the well. Rake Ballinger was definitely out of commission. . . .

JASPER WILSON'S posse spent the entire night combing the foothills of Iron Mountain for some trace of Ballinger. When they returned to Sage Center at dawn, saddle sore, cold and wet and in miserable spirits, they paid a call on Sam Anderson.

"We've come to ride your lazy, good-for-nothin' hide out of town, Anderson," snarled Jasper Wilson, acting as spokesman of the surly group. "We been through a rough night, and we figger you shirked your duty. Sleepin' easy as a baby down here, whilst honest men was out protectin' the same kind of lazy life you been leadin'."

Sam smiled gently. "If you're lookin' for Rake Ballinger, gents, you'll find him tied up tight as a tick down that selfsame unfinished well hole you been criticizin'. Bein' right shiftless, like you say, I'll give you fellers the pleasure of totin' him into the jailhouse for me. Me, I'll have to satisfy myself with the ten thousand-dollar bounty the railroad's put on him."

Jasper Wilson reined his horse over and peered down Sam's well hole. "Well, I'll be double doggoned if he ain't Ballinger!"

"Jasper," drawled Sam idly, pulling out a U. S. Marshal's badge and flaunting it under the blacksmith's nose, "if your brains was as quick as your tongue, you might of saw through this lazy act I been puttin' on. I been on Ballinger's trail for three years, altogether. I put in a year tryin' to learn where that gang had their hideout, up in them Iron Mountains.

"They always just seemed to go up in thin smoke, once they reached them foothills. I figgered the only way to get Rake was to set a trap for him. Which I done, makin' myself right notorious for an onery, lazy critter with a heap of money hid at my house. And which I done also by diggin' half a well, to catch me a human rat in."

"But Sam, you told me different," Pop Burnside said.

"Most of what I told you was true, Pop. I was worked hard back in Kentucky, and I did slave minin' gold, and I got a normal man's streak of laziness in me, I reckon." He grinned. "I ain't

(Concluded on page 113)

An Exciting Novelet

RIDE INTO THE DESERT

By JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Mission of Trust

FROM beside his high roll-topped desk, Kirby Murray looked speculatively at Ellis.

"Johnny," he asked, "how old are you?"

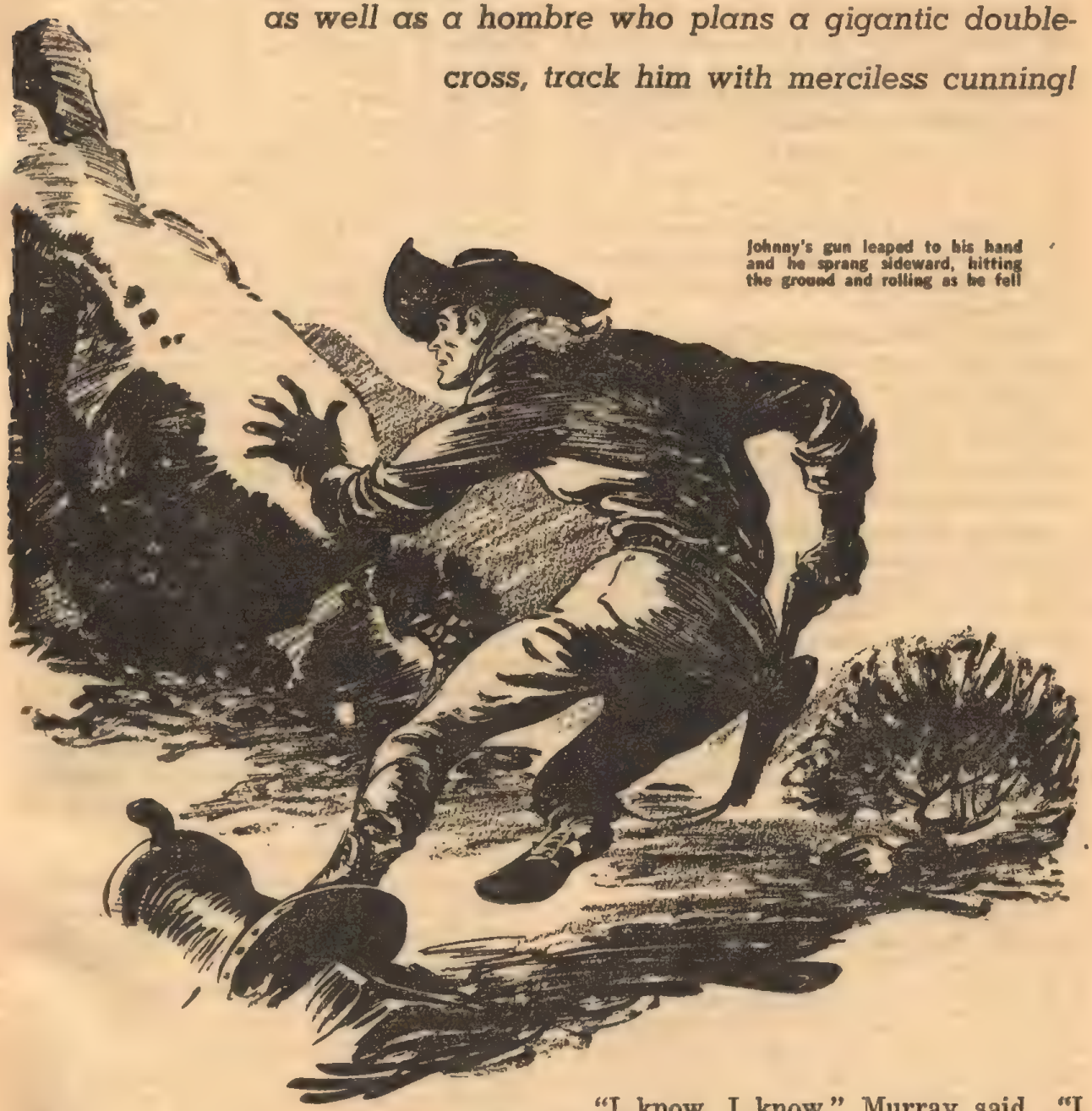
Johnny Ellis hooked the high heels of his boots in the rungs of the creaky chair and shoved his wide-brimmed cow hat back on his head. He looked at the gray-haired banker, one of the wealthiest men in Virginia City, and grinned. His age was his own business but, after all, Mr. Murray was Lottie's father and entitled to the truth. He had summoned Ellis to his banking office with a hint that a "big deal" was to be discussed.

"I'm twenty, Mr. Murray," the red-headed young man said. "I was born in Eighteen Forty-one."

He waited for the banker to express astonishment, but Murray only nodded briefly.

"I'm glad you're so frank, son," the gray-haired man said. "In a big thing like this, I usually go to a little trouble to find out who I'm dealin' with, and I

Carrying the famed and priceless Ginewah Opal, Johnny Ellis makes his way through the wastelands—while a ruthless gunfighter, as well as a hombre who plans a gigantic double-cross, track him with merciless cunning!



Johnny's gun leaped to his hand and he sprang sideward, hitting the ground and rolling as he fell

had you looked up, Johnny. I found out you're trustworthy. Also that your folks were killed by the Assiniboins not long after you were born. You were raised by an uncle who died some years back and you've been on your own since. Is that right?"

Johnny nodded stiffly. "Seems to me yuh could find out by askin' the first five fellers yuh met on the street about me, whether I'm to be trusted or not."

"I know, I know," Murray said. "I know you've got a good name around town, Johnny. Do you think I'd allow you to come callin' on my Lottie if you were not aces up? But the parties mixed up in this deal want me to be double sure, there bein' so much trouble with the road agents lately."

Johnny relaxed. After all, the robberies on the stage routes *had* been bad. Only a couple of weeks previously, the stage from Tonopah to Carson City had been held up, and the driver and the gun

handler on the box with the driver had been killed.

YES, Virginia City was a hell-for-leather town, all right, Johnny told himself. More silver and gold was going through the town now than through any other city in the country, he reckoned. And little wonder then that, along with the prospectors and mine workers—the men who dreamed of hitting it rich, of being bonanza kings—there were hordes of human birds of prey circling around Virginia City, waiting to swoop down on the unwary.

"Well," said Johnny Ellis gravely, "I hope yuh won't—uh—tell Miss Lottie I'm only twenty. She thinks I'm older."

The banker smiled. "Your secret's safe with me, son," he said. "I've got reason to believe you're really older than your years, anyhow."

Johnny thought that over. Yes, he decided, he guessed he was older, inside, than his twenty birthdays would warrant. He had made a name for himself against older, better-known men. It had been Johnny Ellis who had been chosen to ride Pony Express, during the few months it had operated north of the regular California-St. Joseph, Missouri, route, and Johnny had done the job well. He had ridden his three jumps of twenty-five miles each on several trips, and never had lost an ounce of the stuff he was carrying.

There was another page to Johnny's history, and one of which he was not overly proud. When the redhead first had hit Virginia City, he had drifted into the Elite Bar, and had bumped into Emmett Logan. There had been a fight. Emmett had lost the fight and lay buried now in Virginia City's growing cemetery, up on the hill, and Johnny felt pangs of conscience every time he saw Emmett's sister, Flo.

There were some who said that Flo always had been a wild one, even as a child, and probably would have wound up in the Oasis, even if her brother hadn't been killed in a gun fight. But there were others who said that Johnny's bullet, the one that killed Emmett Logan, had sent Flo into the dance hall, to earn her living by the easiest way that offered itself.

But nobody ever said this in front of Johnny.

"Johnny, we've got to be careful, these days," the banker was saying. "Of course, if we ever do get our statehood, we'll get some law and order. Unless, maybe, there's war between the North and the South and Mr. Lincoln makes us a State so he can raise some troops for his side. If it comes I reckon you'll be off to the war with the rest of them, and what will Lottie do then, hey?"

Ellis's face reddened. "I reckon she'll get along all right," he muttered. "She never looks in my direction."

Kirby Murray threw back his head and laughed. "I know different, son," he said. "I suppose you think that, because she sort of acts up to Glebe Rickett once in a while, she's only got eyes for him. I'll let you in on a secret, boy. The fellow she likes is you."

"Do I hear somebody takin' my name in vain?" said a hearty voice from the doorway.

Both men turned to see Glebe Rickett's big frame fill the opening from the narrow hall outside.

Rickett was a big man, physically and influentially. He owned the Ginewah Mine, the richest near Virginia City. Rickett was one of the first "bonanza kings," the forerunner of such great names in Nevada's mining history.

He was handsome, in a dark, burly way, and his clothes reflected his self-satisfaction. He wore suits imported from New York, by way of San Francisco and Sacramento.

Johnny Ellis wrinkled his nose. Johnny hated Rickett for the pomade with which he saturated his thick, black curly hair; hated him for his easy, rather contemptuous smile; hated him most of all because, to his eyes, Lottie Murray always seemed to smile a little brighter at Rickett than at him.

"Come in, come in, Glebe," Murray was booming. "Here's the young fellow who's goin' to do the job."

Johnny's surprised eyes swung toward the banker. Since when, he asked himself, was he being cut in on any deal that included Glebe Rickett? His unfriendly gaze swung back to the big miner.

"He don't look overly pleased," Rick-

ett observed easily. "Are yuh shore he hankers for the trip, Kirby?"

"Sure, sure," Murray said confidently. "He'll be all for it, when we tell him what it is. I was just sort of soundin' him out first."

THE big miner crossed the room and dropped to a chair, across from Johnny. He slid his heavy, black-holstered guns around to the front of him, so that they rested on his broad thighs. Those guns were famous in Virginia City. His name was known from Sacramento to Kansas City as the name of a lightning-fast draw artist and a one-shot killer up to sixty paces.

"Mebbe Johnny won't want to ride for us, knowin' I'm in on this thing," Rickett said.

"Nonsense," Murray snorted. "Johnny will be glad to carry the Ginewah Opal down to Sacramento."

Glebe's gaze went from Murray to Johnny.

"Ginewah Opal?" asked young Ellis. "What-all is that?"

Rickett relaxed in his chair, crossed his legs. Carefully, he bit off the end of the long black cigar.

"Mebbe, it'd be just as well if yuh didn't know what yuh're carryin' when yuh make yore ride," he said.

Kirby Murray shook his head. "No, sir," he said, decisively. "It wouldn't be fair. Johnny's got to know what it is he's carryin' and be willin' to take the risk."

"Risk?" asked Johnny Ellis. "I've taken right smart of risks with the Pony Express."

"This," said Glebe Rickett, "is different."

He left his chair, walked to the windows that looked out on the turmoil of Virginia City's main street, and drew down the cracked and dusty black shades. Johnny Ellis watched in amazement. Despite himself, he felt excitement course through his veins, like electricity. His eyes were calculating as he watched Glebe stride back to Murray's desk.

"Well, Kirby, guess we might as well let Johnny in on what we're plannin'," said the big miner. "We can trust Johnny. We know he won't say nothin' about this to anybody else, if he decides not to string along with us."

Murray nodded, pulled out a bunch of keys, and crossed the room to where the safe rested against the wall. Murray opened the safe, reached inside and withdrew a package about the size of a man's fist, wrapped in coarse paper.

CHAPTER II

A Quarrel With Lottie

ALMOST reverently, the gray-haired banker bore the package to his desk and removed the wrappings. Then he stepped back and beckoned to Johnny Ellis.

"Here she is, son," he said, in a soft voice. "Take a look at somethin' you never saw before and are not likely ever to see again."

Johnny looked at what the paper had held and blinked. There, on the wrapping paper, rested a stone that seemed alive. It was iridescent, seething with color, an intermingling of greens and scarlets, purples, gold and silver.

"Wh-what is it?" he asked breathlessly.

"That's an opal, Johnny," Glebe said quietly. "I reckon that's the biggest opal a man ever dug out of the earth, most likely. Near as we can weigh it, it's better'n twenty-five hundred carats. Kirby and me figger it's worth close to a quarter of a million dollars, once she's cut and polished right."

Johnny Ellis gazed at the giant opal, fascinated by the play of flashing colors in the huge stone. He had seen opals before, but they had been tiny things in comparison with this great gem.

"It's—it's shore a beauty," he ventured finally. "Who found it?"

"I did," said Glebe Rickett, in a flat voice. "I found it myself."

Johnny thought that over, his face impassive. It was strange, he thought, that a big mine owner like Glebe would find a stone, deep under the earth's surface, himself.

He shrugged. He had no doubt that the miner whose pick had unearthed that treasure was some Mexican digger, long since dead.

"Yuh want me to take this stone to Sacramento?" Johnny asked.

"Set down, boy," Kirby Murray said. "I'll tell you our plans."

Ellis returned to the chair he had left and Glebe Rickett resumed his seat.

"It's this way," Murray said. "Glebe dug this stone out of his Ginewah Mine, but didn't let on what he'd found, aimin' to pack the stone out when he went down to Sacramento next month. Now, he's changed his mind."

Rickett's smile was even as he explained.

"There's somebody in Virginia City who's found out I have this stone. And that somebody is keepin' an eye on me, waitin' for me to take it out, so's he can try to get that rock and me at the same time. I might risk it, ordinarily, but I won't take chances with the Ginewah Opal."

He leaned back in his chair. "I'm about through with these parts, Johnny. I've made my pile and I'm aimin' to go back East and enjoy what I've made. And when I get back there, my wife and I are goin' to be somethin' different than a couple that hit it rich in the West. We're goin' to have the Ginewah Opal and, by gosh, there won't be anybody in high society back in New York or anywheres that can match it."

Johnny's eyes were somber as he gazed at the miner.

"Yore wife?" he asked. "I didn't know yuh was married, Rickett."

Glebe's white teeth shone under the luxuriant mustache.

"I'm not—yet," he said, and left it there.

There was a brief, pregnant silence before Kirby Murray spoke.

"The important thing is your decision, Johnny," he said, "will you take the opal out of Virginia City, to Sacramento?"

Ellis opened his mouth and then closed it again, without speaking. His first impulse was to say yes, to show these men that he had no fear of taking the risk of packing out a quarter of a million dollars in a chunk like the great opal.

But why should he do this job for Glebe Rickett, the man he always had thought of as his enemy in Virginia City, the man who was his rival for the hand of Lottie Murray? Was it Lottie whom Glebe Rickett planned to take back East with him as his wife, to wear the Ginewah Opal in New York and Boston society circles?

Why had Glebe picked him? There were other good riders in Virginia City, old hands who were to be trusted as much as he in a mission like this.

He frowned. "How come yore regular rider, Andy Teague, ain't carryin' the rock for yuh?" he asked Rickett.

The big miner's eyes did not flicker as he met Johnny's.

"Andy and me have had a fallin' out," he said. "It's Teague that knows I've got the stone. It's Teague I think's goin' to try to take it away from me when I make my move."

JOHNNY considered. He had heard of no break between Rickett and his right-hand man, thin, cadaverous Andy Teague. He knew Teague, by sight and by reputation. He was a dark, silent man who shunned friends. He drank alone at the bar and his face always wore a tight, bitter expression that never permitted a smile.

Johnny weighed the odds. If Andy Teague really was after the opal, the job probably would require gunfighting. And Andy Teague was known to be lightning fast on the draw. Might not this be part of Glebe Rickett's scheme to eliminate a rival for Lottie Murray's hand?

But, Johnny asked himself, would a man risk losing the Ginewah Opal, worth a quarter of a million dollars, just to rid himself of a rival? That seemed doubtful.

"I don't know," he said aloud, and slowly. "It's a big—responsibility."

"Of course it is, boy," Kirby Murray said quickly. "But you can handle it. You're young, yes, but I've always said you've got a level head on your shoulders. You're close-mouthed and you are not a drinkin' man." He leaned forward, earnestly. "You take this opal out, Johnny, and everybody's goin' to hear about it. You're goin' to be Johnny Ellis, the man who was picked to pack out a quar-

ter-of-a-million-dollar stone. You're go-in' to have a name for yourself, boy, and when the railroad comes along, I'll see you get a good job. And I don't think Lottie'd mind that at all."

No, Johnny thought, Lottie wouldn't mind that. Lottie always was after him to get a steady job. If he got one, she might look with more favor on his proposals.

"I'll never marry a rider, Johnny," she had told him. "I want a husband who'll be home nights, not a man who'll keep me wondering whether he's fighting off Indians or dying of thirst in the desert, when he's out of my sight."

Now Lottie's own father was offering him a chance to prepare for something Lottie could not help but like. He nodded.

"All right," he said. "I'll run yore opal into Sacramento for yuh."

"Fine!" said Kirby Murray, heartily. "That's what I've been waitin' to hear."

The banker came from behind his desk to shake Ellis' hand. Glebe Rickett hooked his thumbs in his gun-belt and smiled evenly.

"I'd like the stone to get out of here before the end of the week, Johnny," Rickett said. "I was figgerin' on sendin' it down to Sacramento Wednesday or Thursday."

"I'll go Wednesday," Johnny said.

"What route yuh takin'?" Rickett asked, and then held up a hand. "No, better not tell even me, Johnny. Mebbe it would be wiser to keep yore plans in yore own head."

"Mebbe it would," Johnny said. "And it might be a good idea for you to get Andy Teague some job around Virginia City that'll keep him busy in these parts when I'm on the trail."

Rickett favored this suggestion.

"I'll try to do that," he said, nodding. "I'll keep an eye on Teague. I don't think yuh'll have any trouble. . . ."

Later that night, Johnny told Lottie: "But I ain't so shore. Teague's no dummy. He can put two and two together. Lottie, I'm goin' to keep an eye out for Andy Teague."

"It sounds terribly dangerous, Johnny," Lottie said hesitantly. "Maybe you ought to tell Dad and Glebe that you've changed your mind."

"Aw, I'll be all right," Johnny said. "Yuh don't have to worry about me."

"But he'll know when you leave town," Lottie protested. "He'll hide somewhere along the trail, kill you from his hiding place, and get the opal."

"Andy Teague's not too smart," Johnny said. "I can fool him, I think."

"How?" Lottie asked.

"He expects me to go right down to Sacramento," Johnny said. "He'll think I'll cut up and over to Oroville and go down the river. I'm aimin' to go north and then east, then swing in a circle and hit for Sonora. That'll fool him."

LOTTIE looked down at her hands, touched with the western sun until they were a creamy tan.

"Maybe," she said, thoughtfully, "you could chip just a little piece of that opal off the big stone and have me a ring made out of it."

She laughed then, at Johnny's startled gaze. He caught at her hand eagerly.

"Yuh will marry me, won't yuh, Lottie?" he asked. "After I get the railroad job, yuh'll marry me?"

She looked past him, toward the lights of bustling, noisy Virginia City. Down below, the town was indulging in its nightly noisy spree.

"If I did marry you, Johnny," Lottie said slowly, "would you take me away from Virginia City?"

"Why, of course," Johnny answered. "We could go down Carson City way or up toward Elko."

"I mean, out of the West!" Lottie burst out passionately. "I want to get away from all this dirt and noise and these common people. I want to get back where men wear clean shirts and the women wear fashionable clothes."

A frown creased Johnny's forehead. "Well, now," he said, slowly. "I don't see how we could leave this territory, Lottie. If yore pa gets me a job with the railroad, looks like I'll have to stick around here to handle it."

"Then you don't love me," she flashed. "If you did, you'd go anywhere with me."

"You know I love yuh," Johnny countered. "Probably the one reason I'm makin' this ride is to get a job that'll allow us to live comfortable."

She seemed about to say something, then closed her lips without speaking.

Johnny Ellis laughed indulgently. "Yuh're just feelin' out of sorts tonight," he said. "I'll be leavin' yuh now. I got to get some supplies on the quiet, so's the whole town won't know I'm packin' for a ride."

He left her and strode to the picket line where his mestino was tethered, and rode back to town.

CHAPTER III

Flo Logan's Warning

JOHNNY ELLIS entered the town, still thinking of what Lottie had said. He was deeply engrossed when his horse shied suddenly. His hand went to his gun.

"Don't move, Ellis," warned a hard voice. "I'm Andy Teague."

Johnny felt the hairs at the back of his neck prickle. He watched, his eyes narrowed, as Teague detached himself from the shadows.

"Out for the night air?" Johnny asked.

The tall, thin gunman shrugged. "Not exactly, Ellis," he said. "Now that Rickett and me's had a fallin' out, every gun-fightin' hombre in Virginia City seems to be after my scalp." He took a deep breath. "But I can give yuh some advice, even if yuh don't want it. Don't throw in on any deal with Glebe Rickett, not if yuh want to stay healthy."

"Who said anything about any deal with Glebe?" Johnny asked.

Andy stared at Ellis. "Yuh think nobody knows about the Ginewah Opal?" he asked. "Shucks, it's all over town. I know that Rickett and Murray has hired yuh to ride the stone to Sacramento."

"There's plenty of gossip in this town that don't mean a thing," Johnny said. "And what's the Ginewah Opal, anyway?"

Despite the darkness Johnny sensed Teague's sour face had twisted into a sort of smile.

"All right," he said. "Play it thataway if yuh want."

He turned and moved back into the shadows whence he had come. Johnny sat his horse motionlessly for a moment, his face grave.

"I'd better check on Andy's story about everybody in town knowin' about the opal," he told himself. "If it's common gossip, like Teague says it is, mebbe Rickett and Murray ought to be warned. Lottie's pa is mixed up in this deal somehow."

He turned his horse's head toward the Broken Arrow Saloon. That place was one of the liveliest in town, and if there was any talk about the giant opal being circulated, he should be able to hear it there.

The Broken Arrow was a bedlam when he pushed through the wide swinging doors. The long bar was lined three-deep.

Johnny nodded to the lookout, "Cash" Graham, who sat on his high stool near the door, his six-gun out of its holster and resting on one knee.

"Hi, Johnny," said Cash. "Got a message for yuh." He bent down to speak in Johnny's ear. "Flo Logan told me to say she wanted to see yuh, if yuh showed up here tonight. She said it was important."

"Flo Logan!" Johnny exclaimed. "Yuh're shore she wanted to see me?"

"Name's Johnny Ellis, ain't it?" Graham asked. "'Course I'm shore. There she is, over there against the wall, near the faro table."

Slowly, reluctantly, Johnny approached the blond girl in the tight-fitting short-skirted dance hall dress, the sister of Emmett Logan, the man he had killed. Never had he been able to look at Flo since that terrible night without feeling the pangs of conscience.

Flo was laughing at some sally a bearded miner at her shoulder had made. Then, as she saw Johnny approaching, her smile vanished.

"Evenin', Miss Logan," Johnny said. "Cash Graham said yuh wanted to see me about somethin'."

Flo Logan's face was white under the rouge, and her mouth was a straight line. She was smoking a tiny cheroot.

"Hello, Johnny," she said. "We can talk better away from the crowd."

She led the way through the jam-packed saloon to a curtained alcove, one of a row of such booths that lined the wall in the rear of the cavernous place. She sat down at a rickety table, and awkwardly Johnny took the chair opposite her.

"Johnny Ellis," she said, "I'm stickin' my nose in business that don't concern me, but I've heard about a big opal you're supposed to carry to Sacramento for Glebe Rickett. Am I right?"

Johnny hunched his shoulders. "Yuh're tellin' the story, ma'am," he said, "I'm listenin'."

SHE leaned back to puff at her cheroot.

"The stone is worth a lot of money," she said. "Andy tells me—I mean, a certain party says that it's worth half a million dollars."

Johnny's face hardened. "I just saw Andy Teague," he told the girl. "He also mentioned an opal. I don't know what the pair of yuh are tryin' to put over, but I'm not interested. Excuse me, ma'am, I've got to be goin'."

"No, wait!" She reached across the table to catch at his sleeve. "It's true that Andy Teague told me about the opal. He—tells me about everything. Andy and I are goin' to get married."

Her face flushed as Johnny stared at her.

"I know," she said. "I guess I am no good, but we're gettin' married and no questions asked. That no-count brother of mine, he started me wrong. And I heard somewhere that you got blamed because I'm a dance hall girl. It ain't so, Johnny. My own brother put me into a dance hall down at Tonopah when I was only fourteen years old. I didn't have a chance to be nothin' else."

"I'm plumb sorry, Flo," Johnny muttered.

"Forget it," she said. "I just didn't want you worrying about me. But that's not why I wanted to talk to you. Promise me you won't carry the Ginewah Opal."

Johnny's brain was working at top speed. It must be, he figured, that Andy Teague was resolved to get the opal and Glebe Rickett at the same time. He wanted revenge.

"Not carry this opal yuh're talkin' about?" he asked. "Why not?"

"Because Glebe Rickett's cold-decking you," Flo said, leaning across the table again. "He hates you, Johnny. He wants your girl, too. Why did he pick you out to ride the opal to Sacramento? You'll be killed."

Johnny reached for his hat. "Seems to me, ma'am," he said stiffly, "yuh're uncommon worried about what happens to me."

Flo shook her head. "It's Andy. That devil Rickett is goin' to use the opal to trick you and get Andy blamed for what happens to you."

Johnny got to his feet pulling his sleeve out of the girl's grasp.

"I think yuh're worryin' about nothin', ma'am," he said, and walked away.

"Johnny! Wait!"

Unheeding, he strode toward the street. From the corner of his eye he saw Andy Teague leave the bar, and drift toward the alcove where Flo awaited him.

"Gettin' the report" Johnny muttered. . . .

On Wednesday Johnny Ellis left Virginia City with the Ginewah Opal, as he had promised to do. He was four hours out on the trail on his raw-boned, wiry mount when he found out he was being followed. He had headed due north, then gradually circled to the east, where the desert lay. At the top of one of the last buttes on the fringe of the arid waste, he scanned his back-trail carefully.

His eyes swept over the country through which he had passed. The landscape lay apparently untenanted, a vast expanse of sagebrush and cottonwood, broken here and there by a clump of live-oak. He was eyeing one of these clumps when he saw a movement in the shadows of the trees. He promptly concealed himself and his horse behind a huge boulder.

"It could be antelope," Johnny thought. "But it ain't. Yep, it's a man on a hoss."

He waited, scarcely breathing, until the half-obscured movement resolved itself into a horse and rider. They were

moving slowly, and from time to time the man bent in his saddle, as though examining the ground.

Johnny watched for a while, then got back into saddle.

"Come on, hoss," he muttered. "We're bein' followed. And the rider shore looks like Andy Teague."

He pushed his tired horse onward, resolved to put as many miles as possible between him and Teague before nightfall. With darkness, he could try to shake his pursuer.

It had been Lottie's father who had handed Johnny the Ginewah Opal. That was what worried Johnny more than the threat of Andy Teague on his trail. Lottie's father had trusted him.

He was grateful for the purple shadows of dusk and eased down his tired buckskin to a walk. Just before dark, he dismounted at a water-hole, hobbled his horse, and set about preparing his cold evening meal. He risked no campfire, knowing that the light of the flames could be seen for incredible distances on the desert.

HE WAS squatted on his boot heels, puffing at a cigarette, when his horse raised its head and nickered. Immediately, Johnny's gun leaped to his hand and he sprang sideward, hitting the ground and rolling as he fell.

"It's me, Ellis," said Andy Teague's familiar voice. "Hold yore fire. I've got the drop on yuh, boy, so don't be hasty. I been havin' the devil's own time chasin' yuh. Yuh're purty good at coverin' yore trail, but I'm an old hand at trackin'."

"What yuh want?" Johnny asked.

"Why, I come to tell yuh—"

That was all Johnny heard. Something crashed down on the back of his head. There was a splitting roar across his body, and a streak of orange flame. He saw the flame and was conscious of that and the appearance of a second man, not Andy Teague, before he dropped into blackness. . . .

He came to slowly, his head splitting, his eyeballs burning. He found himself lying on his back, face up to the blasting desert sun. Groaning, he rolled over and pushed himself to a sitting position.

His horse stood close by, its head low in the wilting heat. The remains of his meal still lay where he had dropped them at Andy Teague's approach. The saddle-bags seemed to be intact, from a distance, but there was no hope in Johnny's heart as he staggered to the kak. He reached into the pommel bag and groped about with shaking fingers.

The Ginewah Opal was gone.

A sigh burst from Johnny's lips. Andy Teague, he thought. He had outsmarted Johnny, keeping his attention focused, while a partner in this robbery had crept up on Johnny from behind.

"But—but why the shot?" Johnny mumbled aloud. "Why didn't the other man kill me? Or why didn't Teague, for that matter?"

CHAPTER IV

Pomade Trade-mark

RETURNING to the water-hole Johnny Ellis gulped thirstily. The drink cleared his head somewhat and eased his jarring headache. Gingerly, he felt the back of his head and winced as his fingers pressed a lump the size of an egg. Whoever had hit him had struck, hard and true, to knock him out.

To knock him out—but not to kill him. Why was that?

"The great Johnny Ellis," he jeered bitterly. "The ridin'est, shootin'est man in Utah Territory. The man that was goin' to make a name for himself, and he lets himself be grabbed like a settin' hen. Teague could've killed me a dozen times if he hadn't of given me warnin', yet after he got me covered, he just crouched there, gabbin', till this other feller knocked me out. That was foolish, on Teague's part. And why did he deal a pardner in, anyhow?"

There were too many whys. Why had Teague and Flo tried to talk him off the trip? Why had that gun been fired? Why had Teague been so anxious to talk with Johnny?

He rubbed his head to clear it of the sullen ache that had followed the blind-

ing stabs of pain. Then he made an unsteady journey to the place from which Andy Teague's voice had come, out of the darkness.

There were hoof prints there, and footprints. And a splash of dark blood staining the alkali. Johnny peered down at the stain, his face tightening. That blood did not belong there, if his ready version of what had happened the night before were true.

Going down on his hands and knees, he studied the prints in the desert floor. Like a giant crab, he scuttled here and there, piecing together the story of those seemingly meaningless marks. To Johnny, they told a narrative which was enlightening indeed.

It took him about an hour, sick and dizzy from the blow he had received, to put together the odds and ends of the tale the prints recounted. Then, laboriously, he climbed to his feet, his eyes narrowed and his face grim.

Now he knew that the gun that had spiked the desert night with orange flame, across his body as he fell, had been aimed at Andy Teague. Whoever had hit Johnny had crawled up on him like a snake and waited patiently for the chance to strike. When he had dropped and rolled, at Andy Teague's approach, bad luck had carried him to a spot directly in front of the hollow where the lurker lay hidden. Teague had held his attention while the other man had smashed him down from behind—and then this other man had shot down Andy.

Was this man a confederate of Teague? After he had knocked Johnny out, had he turned the gun on Andy, who was to have been his partner in the opal robbery? That was possible. But if that were true, why had the man who had struck him down taken so much pains to carry Teague's body away with him? Why had the man left him, Johnny Ellis, knocked out but still alive, to get back to Virginia City and report the robbery? Why had he been spared a slug in the side of the head that would have sealed his mouth forever?

Johnny cursed softly, under his breath, as the answer came to him. The man who had killed Teague, who had struck him down from behind, had *wanted* Johnny to get back to Virginia City!

That was it! That was the answer! The man who had lain hidden in the dark had packed Teague's body to some hidden grave, just so Johnny could go back to Virginia City with a story that could not be proved.

Certainly he had a lump on the head, but who would believe that a hold-up man playing for stakes as big as the Ginewah Opal would be content with cracking the opal's messenger over the head and leaving him to take up the pursuit when he recovered, unless that bandit wanted Johnny to follow his trail back to Virginia City, where any story that he told could be hooted at, disproved by facts?

Who else could it have been but Glebe Rickett? That half-discernible something of which Johnny had been conscious a moment before he had passed out, was the smell of Glebe Rickett's pomade, the big miner's too-fragrant trade-mark.

"Somehow he's goin' to frame you, Johnny," Flo Logan had said, in the Broken Arrow Saloon. "And he'll fix it so Andy is blamed for what happens to you."

THE girl had warned him, but he had not heeded her warning. He had not been able to conceive of any scheme Glebe Rickett might figure out which would trick him, and still let him keep possession of the opal. Now the whole scheme was so obvious, so simple, that Johnny bit back a curse at his realization of its easy manipulation.

Glebe had given Johnny the opal for delivery in Sacramento and then had headed directly for a place where he knew Johnny would have to pass. Glebe Rickett knew the water-holes in the desert as well as any man in the West. Knowing Johnny's route, he could have figured out how many miles the messenger was likely to cover, and have headed east to intercept Johnny at the most likely spot.

"Wait a minute!" Johnny said aloud. "If he knew what route I was takin' he could do that. But he wasn't supposed to know how I was travelin'. He made shore I didn't tell him, when he was in

the office with me and Mr. Murray."

His aching head buzzed with his thoughts as he went back over the events that had preceded his departure from Virginia City. He had told no one that he was going to head north and double back through the desert. No one had known that but himself—and Lottie Murray.

He covered his face with his hands at the shock this thought brought to him. It was an idea he tried to push aside, but he could not. He tried to remember somebody else he might have told, but there was nobody.

"And she said she wanted to go back East," he ruminated bitterly. "She said she wanted fine clothes. I couldn't buy her those things, but Glebe Rickett could. And Glebe could give her the Ginewah Opal besides."

He sat down on the sun-parched ground, made feeble by the cancerous doubts that assailed him.

"There must have been somebody else," he groaned. "Somebody found out where I was headin' and tipped off Glebe."

But there could have been no one else. Nobody but Lottie.

That was why Andy Teague had experienced little trouble in picking up his trail. Teague might have been a good tracker, but Johnny was sure he had been careful enough at covering his trail to have hidden it from anybody except a man who knew which way he had ridden. And Teague had followed him because—because Glebe had sent him. Glebe Rickett, somehow, had won Andy Teague back into his confidence and had sent him on the trail with some message, probably. And while Teague had followed the round-about, half-hidden trail, Rickett had cut across country to be present at the meeting of the two men he wanted to take care of.

He had taken care of both, he had taken back the Ginewah Opal, and when Johnny appeared in Virginia City with his story of having been robbed, who would there be to believe him? Teague was gone, his body hidden somewhere on the desert, and Rickett could and would put over the story that Johnny had handed over the opal to Andy, else why was Johnny still alive?

Slowly, he made his way back to his horse, pulled himself into saddle.

"Come on, hoss," he said, in a flat voice. "We're headin' back to Virginia City, and, most probably, a necktie party—with me as the man at the end of the rope. But we've got to go. We can't run off and let Glebe Rickett get away with this."

Johnny Ellis left his horse tethered to a cottonwood tree on the outskirts of Virginia City that evening at dusk, and made his cautious way down back alleys and side streets toward Kirby Murray's office.

The gray-haired banker was his one hope as an ally. Kirby's daughter may have become a Jezebel who had given the handsome man who had promised her the luxuries of the East the information that had brought ruin to the man who loved her, but her father always had been Johnny's friend. It was possible that he might believe Johnny's fantastic story, the tale of a man stealing a gem that belonged to him, in the first place.

Sombrero pulled low over his eyes, he walked through the gathering gloom toward the yellow-lighted windows that marked Murray's office, the financial heart of Virginia City. He paused on the plank sidewalk long enough to cast a swift glance into the room, as he passed. Kirby Murray, he saw, was alone, seated at his desk with a pile of papers in front of him.

SWIFTLY, easily, Johnny slid into the hallway of the false-front building and, as quietly, let himself into the office. The hinges creaked and Kirby looked up, squinting into the light of the lamp that hung over his desk, trying to make out the identity of the figure in the doorway.

"Why, it's you, Johnny," he said. "You back already, son? I thought—But you couldn't possibly be back."

"I'm back, all right," Johnny Ellis said grimly. "I'm back and I've got a story to tell yuh, Mr. Murray."

Unbidden, he walked to the windows and pulled down the same shades that Glebe Rickett had lowered a few days previously. Murray watched him silently as he drew the shades tight to the

sill and turned back toward the desk.

"I been robbed, Mr. Murray," he said bluntly. "I lost the Ginewah Opal."

The gray-haired man behind the desk started violently.

"Robbed!" he said. "Good heavens, Johnny, you don't mean it!"

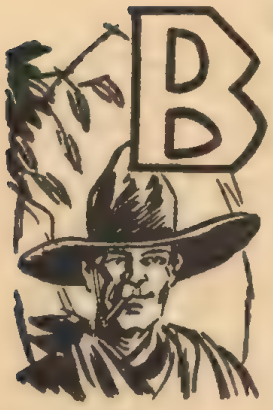
"I do," Johnny said somberly. "Somebody waylaid me at the first water-hole I made and took the stone."

Kirby Murray's knuckes were white as he gripped the edge of the mahogany desk. The banker's face was ashen, his mustache quivering, his eyes round as he stared at Johnny.

"But you're here and you're not hurt," he said. "Was it a gang, Johnny? How did you let them take the stone? Was there a gunfight? What happened?"

CHAPTER V

Masks Off!



BRIEFLY, sparing himself nothing, Johnny Ellis told of the drama that had been enacted at the water-hole. He watched Kirby Murray's eyes narrow, and his heart dropped as he saw the elderly banker shake his head almost imperceptibly in an involuntary gesture of disbelief.

"That's what happened, Mr. Murray," he said desperately. "It sounds funny, the way I told yuh, but it happened thataway."

"But why would Glebe steal his own opal?" Murray asked. "Why would he shoot Andy Teague? I know he had a falling out with Teague, but why didn't he call Teague's hand here, in Virginia City? Why did he go to all that trouble, with all the chances of a slip-up?"

His head jerked up suddenly, and he stared at Johnny.

"And it couldn't have been the way you said," he told the red-haired young man. "It couldn't, Johnny. Rickett was at my place last night, from before dusk till late. We was playin' poker, two-handed stud, till after midnight. He couldn't have made it to your water-hole and back."

He shook his head slowly, sorrowfully, as a man will who has seen the object of his trust turn unworthy.

"No, Johnny" he said sadly. "It won't hold water, son. I was wrong to let you handle the Ginewah Opal. It was too much of a temptation for a boy your age, Johnny. I can see that now." His voice took on an earnest tone. "Play it straight, son," he said. "You can't win, in the long run, dealin' them this way. I'm your friend, Johnny, and I'm tellin' you from the heart. Tell us where you left Andy Teague, after you gave him the opal, and Glebe and I will get up a posse to go after him. You don't have to show in it at all. You just leave quietly—I think I can talk Glebe into forgettin' you had a part in it—and we'll try to get back the opal."

"But Mr. Murray," Johnny pleaded, "it's like I told yuh. Teague's dead. He didn't take the opal, no more than I did. Glebe Rickett killed Teague and took the stone. He only knocked me out so's I'd be blamed for fixin' to steal the thing. If I was killed, people would know somebody else took the opal and there'd be too many questions for Rickett's pleasure."

Murray brought his fist down on the desk top with a crash.

"And I say your story's plain foolishness" he half-shouted. "Glebe Rickett was at my place last night. He couldn't have taken the opal from you. No, Johnny, you and Teague fixed this up between you. You were seen talkin' to Teague's woman, that Logan girl, at the Broken Arrow. Before that, you was seen talkin' to Teague, close to my place." There were deep lines in the banker's face as he shook his head again. "I'm givin' you a break, Johnny, because Lottie thinks a lot of you. Get your horse and ride, boy. Take the trail you used yesterday, but keep goin'. Go north and then swing east and hit for Sonora. I won't tell anybody which way you went."

There was a chill within Johnny that iced his soul. His hand moved to the gun of his belt.

"Just how did yuh happen to figger I was takin' that route?" he asked in a

voice that was deadly calm. "I didn't tell but one person about that, and that was yore daughter, Lottie."

Murray's face was suddenly gray. "I—she told me," he faltered. "You know how girls are, Johnny. She didn't mean anything by it, and I haven't told anybody."

"Except Glebe Rickett!" Johnny said. "Between the two of yuh, yuh fixed me and Andy Teague right."

"I—I—" the banker said, and then stopped talking.

"All right, Johnny," said a deep voice from the doorway, behind Ellis. "I got two guns right at yore back and I'm waitin' for yuh to make a move."

Johnny's hands began rising slowly as Glebe Rickett walked into the room. The miner holstered one of the big black Smith & Wessons and flipped Johnny's gun from the redhead's belt with a deft movement.

"Set down," Rickett ordered. "Set down over there and behave, while we figger out what to do with yuh."

JOHNNY lowered himself into a chair, his eyes fixed on Rickett. Glebe was smiling his usual smile, but beneath the curling mustache his mouth was set in an evil sneer.

"The smart boy," he mocked. "He wasn't afraid of Glebe Rickett. Not Johnny Ellis. He thought he was great shakes when he rode out of here with the Ginewah Opal and he found out he was just a baby, too young and too simple to play with the grownups. And now he's goin' to taste some lead and get planted somewheres, with the opal on him, so's we can say we chased you and Teague while yuh was tryin' to make Mexico. When we get through with yuh, Ellis, yore name will be the worst in the West—the feller that was trusted to do a job and turned crook on the men who had faith in him."

"Glebe," said Murray, from behind the desk, "it ain't really necessary to kill the boy, is it? Can't we just chase him out of town and tell him he'll be safe so long's he don't talk?"

Glebe Rickett's eyes switched to Murray for one burning second, then returned to Johnny.

"Yuh think them fellers in the East that bought the opal aren't goin' to ask questions?" he asked the banker scornfully. "You think they ain't goin 'to turn this country upside down, tryin' to find Teague, who's supposed to have the stone? And when they can't find Teague—and they never will—ain't they goin' to look for Johnny? If he's alive, ain't Johnny goin' to talk?"

"But nobody will believe him, against us," Murray said.

"Our word might carry some weight around here," Rickett said. "But mebbe it don't carry a quarter-of-a-million-dollars worth of weight. If Johnny's dead, and Teague can't be found—because he's dead and buried where they'll never find him—that Eastern crowd might suspect us, but they won't be able to prove nothin'. That's the only safe way, Murray, and that's the way we're goin' to play it."

Johnny kept his eyes fixed on Rickett with an effort. It took all his power to keep from watching that office door, the door through which Glebe Rickett had come. He had seen that door open a crack, silently, and he knew that somebody was listening there. That somebody, of course, might be a partner to Rickett and Murray in this unholy deal that spelled Johnny Ellis' doom. But it might—just might—be somebody else.

And who would it be likely to be? He got the answer in his own mind after a second's thought. Flo Logan, of course. The man who was to have been her husband had ridden out onto the range and had not come back. Flo had feared that Rickett would frame Andy Teague. When the man she loved dropped out of sight, it would be Rickett whom Flo would follow, to find out what had happened to Teague.

"Yes," Rickett was saying, "we've got to kill Johnny and join him up with the man who was supposed to be his pardner, Andy Teague." He chuckled. "Teague thought I'd made things up with him. Yep, I sent him after yuh, with a message to come back to Virginia City on account of a change in plans. He mistrusted me plenty, Teague did, but I told him a story which he swallowed like a baby gulpin' down candy." His chuckle grew louder. "And the skunk died without gettin' a chance to

fire a shot! The big, bad gunman—he made himself a fine target, settin' there, gabbin' with you. He died without knowin' what hit him, the blasted fool!"

"Glebe Rickett!" cried a voice at the doorway. "Look at me and know you're goin' to die."

Rickett spun instinctively, the big black gun he held thundering. Its bellow drowned out the crack of the derringer Flo Logan held. Johnny's gun lay on Murray's desk and the redhead leaped. As Rickett turned, his fingers closed over the gun a second before Murray's hand clamped itself over the weapon.

Johnny's fist drew back and smashed into the banker's face. Murray went over backward and Johnny had his gun. He whirled toward Glebe as the black Smith & Wesson crashed out a second shot. There was the whine of a slug that brushed Johnny's cheek before it smacked into the wall. Then Ellis' thumb flicked and Glebe Rickett staggered. Another shot and Rickett half-turned, dropped his gun, and clawed desperately at the air for a second. Slowly he collapsed and fell, with a jar that shook the frame building.

FLO LOGAN clung to the doorway, her knees sagging. A widening splotch of blood stained her short-skirted dance hall dress. Her face was chalky but there was a half-smile on her face.

"I got him," she said, and coughed. "I slowed him up, Johnny, so you could finish him off. I did that for Andy, Johnny. I'll tell him when I see him—tell him—that—"

Her head lolled and her body went limp as Johnny reached for her. Slowly, reverently, he lowered her to the floor.

A scrabbling noise at the other side of the room turned Ellis, his gun ready. Kirby Murray was staggering to his feet, blood streaming from his nose. He held out a shaking hand, palm out, toward Johnny.

"Don't shoot!" he squalled. "I'll tell, I'll tell! It was all Glebe's fault. He thought up the whole idea. I wasn't to blame. I owed him money. He could've ruined me. He stole the Ginewah Opal from a Mexican he killed to get it. We sold it to an Eastern crowd and got the cash before we'd ship it. The opal's in the safe, over there. Don't kill me!"

"It won't be necessary," said the cold voice of Tim Hurney, the marshal.

The man who wore the Government's badge of office stepped into the room, at the head of a crowd of goggle-eyed men who crowded the doorway.

"We'll handle this all legal, Ellis," the marshal said. "We heard Murray confess his part in the whole thing. The girl told me what she suspected and I was trailin' her, but I got here too late, it looks like. Or mebbe it's better this way, for her, at that."

"It was Glebe Rickett's fault!" Murray wailed. "He made me do it. I didn't kill anybody. All I did was pass on what my daughter told me to Rickett. It isn't her fault, either. Don't blame Lottie for what I did. Promise me, Johnny, you won't blame Lottie."

Johnny Ellis shook his head. "I don't blame her," he said. "It's natural for a girl to trust her dad. Why, I trusted you, Mr. Murray, didn't I?"

He watched, cold-eyed, as Hurney dragged the banker out of the office, into the street and down the jammed sidewalk toward the jail. He knew he had seen the last of Lottie's father. Even if Tim Hurney could protect his prisoner against a lynching mob, the trial that would settle Murray's fate would be brief and conclusive.

He sighed and removed his hat as two men passed him, carrying Flo's limp body. Yes, he thought, it was as the marshal had said, this might be the best way for Flo Logan. Without Teague, she had nothing to live for and now— Well, she had been confident enough that she was going to meet Teague, wherever she was going.

He cast a glance at the squat safe in a corner of the room. The Ginewah Opal was inside that iron box. For all of him, it could stay there forever. It must be true, he told himself, that opals really do bring tears, as folks said. This one would bring tears to Lottie Murray.

He straightened and turned toward the door. It was up to him, he knew, to tell Lottie. He did not know what he would say, but somehow he knew that he would find the right words. Somehow she would find strength from them to help her through this dark hour.

The owlhoot spun and attempted to throw down again

DEATH RIDES LOST MESA

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Setting out to claim his wild horse ranch, Bill Shaw runs into the mystery of a sheriff's disappearance!

KIDS with jam-smeared faces broke from supper tables and rushed down to the Red Pass Livery Stable to gaze at the handsome stallion just brought in.

A tall loose-limbed waddy, busy rubbing down the animal, looked up, grinning at the youngsters. Bill Shaw was always proud when kids, especially, admired Streak, his big gray stallion. He singled out a freckle-faced boy who looked a bit more wan than the others.

Bill lifted the boy to the stallion's back, and led the big gray out of the stable and along the street.

From a window in the last house in the block, a pretty young woman looked wistfully at the grinning youngster. The button was her son, the son of Sheriff Dan Lake, her

husband, who had not returned from a manhunt.

She watched the waddy closely. He was a stranger to Red Pass. He was smiling back at young Davie now—an infectious smile which seemed to spill out of wide, steel-blue eyes.

Now the button was pointing to the house—to a poster tacked to the wall.

Bill turned. He strode up for a closer look.

"He prob'ly killed my pop," the boy said with a catch in his voice, as Bill gazed at the picture on the poster.

The kid was still chattering, but Bill wasn't listening. He was looking at a pair of dark eyes—"Buzzard eyes," he told himself—then at a jagged scar high up on the man's forehead. "Just like he's been struck by forked lightnin'," he thought. He read that the man was wanted both for jail break and the subsequent hold-up and robbery of a stagecoach. Name: Hart Dolman.

"Think yuh could out-draw him, if'n you—"

The boy was cut off by the soft voice of his mother who'd come to the door to retrieve him.

Bill Shaw removed his hat.

"Sorry, ma'am, if I busted in to all the suppers in Red Pass," he apologized. "But wherever I go, the kids shine up to Streak."

"A lovely horse indeed," Mrs. Lake said. Then: "You recognize the picture there?"

Bill turned sharply toward her.

"No, ma'am. But I was curious. I've not long finished a hitch with the Border Patrol, so such posters interest me. I'm on my way up to my dad's old camp at Lost Mesa."

"Lost—Mesa?" The woman's face suddenly blanched, her eyes filling with a sharp light as of terror. "Why, that's where Dan, my husband, went and—and—" Her eyes clouded over and she bit at her underlip.

"I gathered somethin' had happened from the boy, ma'am," Bill said. "How long's yore husband, the sheriff, been missin'? 'Course they've hunted for him, huh?"

Mrs. Lake dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, then suddenly raised her head.

"He's been gone five weeks, sir. They found his deputy, badly shot up. It was he who claimed this scar-head had done away with Dan."

"An' the case is now closed, ma'am? The posse didn't catch up with any of the bandits?"

"That's right, sir. A United States marshal and posse combed the whole of Lost Mesa, but didn't find a sign of Dan, or of the bandit gang. But—" she broke off, sighing, "I—I somehow can't bring myself to believe Dan's gone."

Something seemed to click in Bill Shaw's consciousness. He turned again to gaze at the poster.

Bill had completed his hitch with the Border Patrol and had set his sights on the wild horse country beyond Lost Mesa where his dad had prospected for seven years following his mother's death.

On his retirement, Nate Shaw had lived with Bill in the south. He had told Bill the stories of that strange, beautiful country and its wild horses. Bill wasn't interested in the gold in the creeks and hills. Before signing for service with the Patrol, he'd been a wrangler and horse hunter. He figured to settle in his dad's old valley and establish a spread of his own. And it was for this reason that he brought in Streak, the handsome dappled gray Orloff, along with a little mustang pack mare. . . But into the Lost Mesa picture had suddenly come death, and intrigue.

HE turned to the sheriff's wife and gave her a soft smile.

"I'll keep all my eyes open, ma'am," he said. To the button, he added, "Take care of yore mother, bud."

"Shore will, mister, but remember what I said, or was goin' to say. If'n yuh meet up with him, out-draw him, huh?"

Bill nodded, grinning. He turned and led the stallion back to its stall.

Sitting on a bale of hay while the horse munched his feed, Bill thought over this new shaping of events. Suddenly he shrugged as if having reached some final conclusion.

"If," he opined, "a marshal an' a posse has combed that whole country, it's a safe bet the owlhoot outfit's hightailed it an' the sheriff's done for."

He got to his feet and strode on out to get some supper. Tomorrow, at sun-up, he would ride up along the Lost Mesa trail, a hope in his mind that the valley beyond was as peaceful now as when his dad had left it. . . .

Bill Shaw pulled his stallion up short as they came through a defile. His lips parted as he conned the Mesa and the valley beyond. Never in all his travels had he viewed any country so savagely beautiful. It had flashed into his consciousness with a suddenness that accentuated its awe-inspiring magnificence.

For some time now he had been hearing a sound like trapped, distant mountain thunder, muffled and mysterious. It haunted him until he concluded it must be the drumfire of Death's Falls, of which his father had spoken so often.

He was still staring, spellbound, into the westerly vista when a sharp bolt of gunshot lightning exploded in his brain. The big stallion squealed, sunfishing. He whirled and almost crashed into the little pack mare standing near by. The sharp thunder which had attended the gunshot lightning had wrapped Bill Shaw in a dark cloak of unconsciousness before he hit the ground.

Bill awakened and with some effort opened his eyes. The thunder of the waterfall was no louder now than the booming of the throbbing pain in his head. He weakly ran a hand up along his scalp. It came away covered with sticky blood.

"Out-draw him, huh?" Bill faintly recollected the young button's words back at Red Pass.

Death rode the Lost Mesa with sharp spurs. But Bill could not quite figure things out. He'd been shot at and creased, but why hadn't the gunman come along to make sure of the effect of his shot?

Bill groaned as he half rolled, in an attempt to get to his feet. He must find some water to cleanse his wound and refresh his pounding head.

The westering sun had almost disappeared, leaving the mesa and the valley beyond bathed in a fiery glow of molten gold and purple. Bill decided he had better wait until the shadows deepened. This was dangerous country, and he wasn't taking any chances.

But he must have swooned again through his premature efforts to move, for when next his eyes opened, the thunder of the falls was deafening. The spray of the cascade tumbling into the pool above which he now lay, splashed his face.

Now he felt himself being lifted bodily. He was carried to a plateau behind the cliff from which the falls gushed. But although somewhat recovered, Bill offered no protest to the big man who did the toting.

Bill winced at the bite of sharp tincture in his scalp wound. But it shortly cleared his head, and as he opened his eyes, he stared at the man bending over him.

"Dolman!" he gasped, noting the jagged scar on the man's forehead.

"That's right, pilgrim! Yuh must have seen a poster back in Red Pass, didn't yuh?"

"Yeah. But I don't get it, Dolman," Bill intoned huskily. "Yuh shoot a man off his horse, then carry him near half a mile an' fix him up. Got some other grim idea about finishin' him off?"

Dolman's thin lips drew back in a cold smile.

"I might have kilt a man a couple of weeks back, stranger," he replied. "But if I did, it was in self defense. Figger he was a deputy admirin' to take me in, and he wasn't partic'lar how he took me in, so I shot it out with him. I don't figger to be taken, until I'm ready to go. Got a job to clean up here. If things work out all right, mebbeso Red Pass folks'll know they made a mistake, an', I hope, find out what happened to their sheriff."

BILL'S face took on a thoughtful look. He opined that this big scar-headed man was telling a straight story. The fact that Dolman had helped him when he could easily have killed him if he wanted to, was enough to show that the man wasn't lying.

"How come yuh got mixed up in the stagecoach robbery then?" Bill asked. "Somebody must've seen yuh, to be able to put the ring in yore nose an' get that poster printed. Yuh got a jail record, or they wouldn't have yore picture."

"Yuh're part right, feller," Dolman replied. "I broke out of Cheyenne jail because I got tired payin' off for somethin' I had no hand in. I broke out because I had a trail to take —and it's headed me close up with death more'n once. Now I got to think up some way of gettin' rid of you. No, don't get scary. Yuh've still got yore gun an' it's loaded. But I got to get a promise from yuh that yuh won't ride in and sound off at Red Pass. I want time to finish my job here in my own way. That clear, stranger?"

"Okay, Dolman, I throw in with yuh," Bill agreed. "Thanks for what yuh've done. Now, do yuh want to talk some more, so I'll know what an' who to watch out for?"

"There's three pretty salty jiggers runnin' loose," Dolman warned. "Make sure yuh look twice at one of them before yuh shoot him, if yuh have to shoot. Yore hosses are tied up in the willow brakes off to the south. Now yuh should be able to find a hideout up to the north of Eagle Pass. Hang an' rattle a couple of days. I'll likely get in touch with

yuh ag'in, if—"

He broke off and helped Bill to his feet.

"Bleedin's stopped in yore head," he informed Bill. "I padded it up an' taped it—some stuff I got from yore war bag. So long now."

Bill shook the big man's hand and moved unsteadily down to the lower level of the valley and across to the brakes. He didn't intend to go very far tonight before making a camp. He wanted rest now more than anything—rest and a chance to think matters over. Dolman had some grim purpose up here at Lost Mesa and although Bill Shaw had come up in peace, open warfare had been declared on him, and he had no intention of taking it hiding out.

In the dead of night, he was startled from sleep by the stomping and bugling of Streak, his gray stallion. Then, from the valley beyond, he caught the shrill counter challenge of a wild stallion. Bill went to sleep thrilled by that wild cry. There were wild horses sure enough in the valley and hills beyond Lost Mesa. . . .

For four days Bill clung to a hideout in back of Eagle Pass, but on the fifth morning he decided to end this life of inactivity and uncertainty. His head wound was nearly healed and he was spoiling for some action. He had made short scouting trips around, but, save for a suspicion of movement on one occasion, and being startled by a rifle shot another time, he had not glimpsed any man sign.

In the evening, just before sundown, Bill twirled the cylinder of his six-gun. He was going out. His horses were well tethered in a grass bowl near by.

He crawled along a rimrock shelf and squeezed himself through a narrow cleft between two towering cliff faces. Suddenly, in the clear, he halted. Where his shelf sheered off he glimpsed a lower, wider shelf below, off left, and even as he watched, he saw the figure of a man crawl out on the ledge.

"Dolman!" he told himself. The big man was heading toward a huge boulder which seemed to terminate the shelf on which he lay. All at once Bill's brows flicked up. Something glinted sharply. It was hanging from a stunted greasewood root.

Bill wormed his way a few feet farther along the ledge, his heart beating a sharper tempo as Dolman inched nearer his objective—that swaying, glinting object on the shrub.

Suddenly, to Bill's amazement, he saw the prone form jerk at the smacking impact of a slug. Almost instantaneously a rifle blasted.

"Hit!" Bill gasped. He half turned as a large rock went bounding down a slope off right. Bill tried to turtle in his head as he glimpsed a man heeling on down the slope of an old slide. Slowly Bill raised his gun. The range was long, but he was going to make a try for that gunny. Before his trigger finger could take in full squeeze, a shot blasted from the shelf rock below. Dolman had raised himself to an elbow and fired.

The man on the slide spread out his arms, spiraled once, then folded to go bounding down along with the rock he had started, to the floor of the canyon below.

Bill Shaw had to retrace his steps back to his camp in order to get around and down to Dolman's rock level. He took his time, for he wanted the cover of twilight. Dolman had told him of three owlhooters on the loose up in this wild country. There were two live ones left.

It took Bill the best part of half an hour to get down to the shelf on which Dolman lay. He quickly crept forward until he was within whispering range of the big man.

"Hang an' rattle, feller," he called. "This is Bill Shaw. Yuh hit bad?"

"Yeah—bad, Shaw. Side wound. Don't be in any hurry, though. I seen another jigger down below there. It was him I was watchin' when I was shot."

The darkness deepened swiftly as Bill passed Dolman and hurried to the shrub ahead. He snatched an article of clothing from a spike and gasped when he saw what it was—half a vest, to which was attached a sheriff's star.

He crept back to the wounded man, and swiftly set to work with water canteen and medicaments he had brought in a small canvas bag inside his shirt.

Dolman had been plugged fairly deep in the right side, one of his ribs having been grazed, if not split.

"I'll just stop the blood for now, an' clean it out, feller," he whispered. "When we get light, I'll stitch up the tear where the slug came out an' leave the front openin' alone, to drain. Another pull at the canteen now?"

IT took all Bill's strength to drag the big man back to camp. When they got there, Dolman fell asleep, mumbling now and then as if in a delirium. He slept fitfully all night

while Bill watched and cared for him.

At dawn, Bill took a chance and boiled water. He figured that the wind would carry his smoke tang away from the owlhooters.

He bathed Dolman's wound afresh, applied antiseptic, and stitched up the tear as planned. Next, he made a wick of lint and probed it deep into the wound to act as a drain.

"And now some hot coffee into yuh, big feller, and yuh'd better get well, because you an' I are goin' to make a clean-up here. I ain't hidin' out any longer. My target here's to get established at my dad's old place. There's a big wild stallion just beggin' to be trapped. . . ."

Bill continued to chatter as he fried side bacon and warmed up a can of beans. He wanted to keep Dolman interested.

While they were eating, Dolman talked some more.

"Okay, Shaw," he said. "We're in it together. You asked me if I figgered the sheriff was still alive. Well—I've hunted all over this country an' ain't found any sign of his body or of a grave. You found that piece of his vest. I can't say if he's alive, but I hope he is. I got to clear myself with him an' his missus an' button."

Bill watched the big fellow enjoy his food though every now and then he winced with pain and reached out a hand to steady himself as his vision seemed to blur.

Dolman turned and smiled thinly at Bill.

"Yuh've done a right good job on me, Shaw. I can tell. Now, since we're hookin' up forces, let me tell yuh to watch out every minute for the boss of the owlhoot gang—Lucky Maynar. He's as cute as a wolverine, an' as deadly a two-gun killer as ever stayed out of jail. We'll lay low a few days, till my side knits, then—well, we'll figger out somethin'." . . .

In less than a week Dolman pronounced himself ready for action. They decided to approach the Shaw place by way of the log cabins out in back.

"Got to take the hosses, though," Dolman advised. "This is lion country, Shaw. You pack most of the stuff we'll need right now on yore saddle. I'll ride the little mare in bareback. And we'll cache the rest of our gear till we can come back for it."

Dolman suggested it would be better for them to split up—Bill taking the north route and he, Dolman, the south.

"I'll see you started before I ride off," Dolman intoned, his eyes alive with a sharp light of enthusiasm again. "If—if somethin' happens, as it could, that we don't meet up an' you git clear, I wish yuh'd tell that little woman in Red Pass the truth, will yuh?"

"I'll be meetin' yuh up at the cabins, Hart," Bill replied. "Adios, an' good huntin', amigo!"

Bill led his horse off. Once again he had become a manhunter. He wondered what old Nate would have thought about his having to shoot his way into the cabins at the valley beyond the Lost Mesa. But for the moment Bill was not thinking of his father's claims or his own establishment there; he was thinking of a misty-eyed woman back at Red Pass and of a big scar-headed man now skirting the south of Lost Mesa.

The second night out on the trail, Bill closed in on the timber at the back of his father's smallest cabin. Twice along the route, a most torturesome route through the savage Medicine Bows, he had glimpsed man sign. This evening, he had heard the blast of a rifle, and he wondered now, as he loosened the cinch on Streak's saddle, how Dolman had made out. It wasn't Dolman's shot, for the big man packed crossed belts of pearl-handled sixes—.44's.

Bill spoke softly to the snuffling stallion.

"Hold yore breath a spell, pardner," he said. "I got a queer feelin' in the pit of my stomach somethin's goin' to bust loose tonight."

He dismounted, moved away from the stallion and crept on through the fragrant spruces toward the cabin almost screened by wild fruit thickets. He passed some of his father's old workings, and it gave him a tug at his heart.

As he catfooted up to the small cabin, which, according to his dad's chart, was a storehouse and tool shed, Bill was filled with a feeling of nostalgia and pride. This had been Nate's home for seven years. It was part of Bill's hinterland inheritance now. . . .

ALL at once Bill started. The crunching of dry leaves was unmistakable. At first he thought of black bear here in the wild fruit, but suddenly he heard a voice, a deep-throated voice grumbling, swearing.

He fingered his gun butt, moved around the east wall of the little cabin for better cover. The voice was sounding off again.

"Holin' up so long must've locoed yuh shore enough, Lucky," it growled. "You ain't

content with holdin' the sheriff a prisoner, instead of blastin' him out, but yuh wing this big jigger an' have us carry him up here, too. What in tarnation's got into yuh?"

There was no answer from the man called Lucky. Bill figured he was Lucky Maynar, the boss of the owlhoot gang.

A heavy split-pole door creaked open and the men stomped indoors. Bill clapped his ear to a broken chink to listen.

A new voice sounded now.

"Brung yuh a compadre, Sheriff. Now the party's near complete. One more maverick to round up, then we give yuh all the water cure—Death's Falls."

Indecision stayed Bill's hand for the moment. He didn't want to gum up his shooting in the gloom and probably bring about the swift death of both Sheriff Lake and Hart Dolman.

The owlhoots were now leaving the small cabin. Bill stepped back as the door opened. He glimpsed the shadowy forms of the bandits as they strode on through the thicket, evidently heading for the large, home cabin.

As a faint glimmer of light showed through the wild cherry scrub, Bill catfooted on to his father's old shack. Flattening himself along the log wall, he crept cautiously toward the small window, his gun ready with finger coiled about the trigger.

Looking in, he saw something that made him gasp in amazement. Bending over a smoky oil lamp he glimpsed a face which he took to be Dolman's. He swallowed hard, couldn't understand it. Then his face twisted in a strange grimace. He brought his gun hand up—but even as he watched, the man finished trimming the wick, stood up as the light flared brighter. He shoved back his hat—and for the second time, Bill gasped. There was no scar at this man's hairline!

Bill froze as the shack door opened. He heard the stomp of footsteps, and figured the man was going out to see to the horses, or to bring in water from a near-by spring. Bill backed away. When clear of the smaller cabin, he turned and hurried back to his outfit, where he dug his Winchester out of the saddle boot, and stowed some spare ammunition in his pockets.

Now back at the storehouse, he slowly shoved open the door. There was a light stir within. He called softly.

"Hold it, Sheriff, Hart. This is Bill—Bill Shaw."

"Shaw? You say you're Shaw?" The voice came weakly from Bill's left.

"That you, Sheriff? Yeah, I'm Nate Shaw's son. You okay, Dolman?"

Dolman, over against the right wall, grunted.

"Dolman, you said, Shaw?" the sheriff weakly inquired. "Is that the hombre those owlhoots packed in here?"

Bill made no reply. He moved over and slit the thongs which secured Dolman's wrists and ankles. He helped Dolman to his feet.

"You hurt bad?" he asked the big man.

"Head's busted some. It was the little mare took the worst of it, Bill. We both rolled down to a canyon bottom. I had to shoot her. Sorry about that. Now, let's get the sheriff cut loose an' into the clear."

Bill moved over to the old bunk where the sheriff was tied up. He cut the thongs and helped the lawman to his feet, but Lake was so weak, he almost pitched to his face. A half sob shook him as he attempted to thank Bill.

"Six—seven weeks of this, Shaw," he whispered huskily. "They beat the strength out of me, an' most nigh starved me. Yuh'll likely have to help me along a spell. . . ."

Back at his temporary camp, Bill examined Dolman's head wound, which wasn't serious. He fed bannock and cold bacon to Sheriff Lake.

"Seems like my stomach's all shrunk up, Shaw," the lawman said. "Now, mebbe you or Dolman or both'll do some talkin'. I want to know why Maynar didn't kill me when he's had so many opportunities. I asked him more'n once to finish me off, but he always claimed he had another rat to trap, an' lately he's been talkin' of two rats. Reckon it's you two. But Dolman—you—I can't see you plain, but in this light yuh're a dead ringer for Maynar!"

Bill Shaw was all set to make this same declaration, but the sheriff had beaten him to the draw.

"Some relative of yores, Hart?" he asked.

"Yeah. I was goin' to wise yuh up in plenty of time, Bill," said Dolman. "I did hint at it before we split up the oher day, if yuh remember. Lucky's a half-brother, an ornery cuss all his life. Had a likin' at school for beatin' up smaller kids, an' blowin' up bullfrogs an' tearin' their legs off.

"It was him framed me into a jail stretch for train robbery I never had no hand in. Not only that—there was my wife, but I needn't go into that. He got one of his gang to plant this latest stage-coach robbery on

to me. That's how come the poster, as I told yuh. Tonight, he could have finished me off, but it's like it was with the frogs. Lucky figgered to trap us all, then he'd scheme a way for us to go out slow an' mighty painful."

DOLMAN stopped, uttered a deep sigh. He got to his feet, teetered uncertainly a minute, then began to flex his arms and leg muscles.

All at once he spun on Bill.

"Now listen," he clipped. "I want Maynar! I'm goin' after him, an' I want yore Colt, Bill. You take yore Winchester. I got more at stake than either of you men."

"Let him have it, Shaw," the sheriff agreed.

"Okay, Hart, but we're goin' in together," Bill clipped back. He handed over his six-gun and turned to pick up the rifle.

But Dolman was not ready to go just yet. He suggested that they rest up a while, till the light got better.

"With the first light of day, Bill," he said. "If I drop off to sleep, wake me before it gets full dawn."

It wasn't long before the sheriff was snoring under Bill's blanket. Dolman hunkered down, his back against a tree bole and Bill kept a listening ear to the night sounds as he lay resting on the ground.

He must have dozed off, for suddenly he was awakened by a terrific blast of gunfire and he went sprawling for his Winchester. Sheriff Lake came out of his heavy sleep, and Bill cautioned him to lie low.

Two more shots thundered and a slug went whining into space over Bill's head as he lunged on toward the cover of the storehouse.

As he swung around the storehouse cabin, Bill heard a rapid-fire exchange of shots, then suddenly the drum of hoofbeats.

Hart Dolman stood swaying as Bill skirted the main cabin and fetched up with him.

"Hart! It's Bill. What happened?"

"Got one. Maynar used him as a screen to make his getaway. But I'm goin' after Maynar, Bill. Don't try to stop me. I'm takin' yore big gray."

Bill knew better than to try to hold Dolman. He hustled back to the camp and threw the saddle on Streak. Then, as the big man mounted, he hurried to a snorting bay gelding in the thickets, quickly mounted and sped along in Dolman's trail.

The sun was preparing to push up through its own sea of vermilion and fiery gold as Bill struck the brakes of the lower valley leading to the pool below Death's Falls.

He pulled in sharply when he came up on Streak hitched to a sapling. Dolman had gone in afoot.

Since Bill had heard and believed Dolman's story, he was inspired to assist in the man's vindication in every possible way, albeit he had no inclination of interfering with the big fellow's climactic plans.

He dismounted and hitched the bay, then pulled back the hammer of his Winchester as he crept on through the second growth willows and aspens.

He reached the rugged incline which led to the Mesa when suddenly he flattened. A shot had blasted the quiet of the grim zone, a quiet not otherwise disturbed even by the steady thunder of the falls.

Bill glimpsed a sleek black mare grazing off right—which meant that Maynar, too, was afoot.

Two shots sharply punctured the steady brawl of the falls as Bill inched his way along the rimrock. He rose now and streaked across a short clearway to the cover of a bluff.

For the first time since striking the Mesa, he glimpsed Dolman. The big man came out from behind a boulder, advancing in a half crouch. Bill swung and gasped as he saw a similarly clad, similarly built man leave cover. Like two gladiators realizing there was only one way to a finish fight, they moved slowly, deliberately, in to short gun range.

Bill Shaw was no tenderfoot in a game of this sort. This wasn't the first time he'd stood by on the sidelines while an affair of honor or vindication had been settled. But he felt a storm of uncertainty now. He had formed a great attachment for Dolman and wanted him to live.

Suddenly he saw the big fellow stumble off balance. His left heel had rolled on a rock.

Bill saw the flash of Maynar's gun at long range. As Dolman attempted to recover his balance, a slug ripped through his left upper arm. The left-hand Colt clattered to the rock as he pitched forward.

Bill Shaw could have killed Maynar easily with a single shot, but he had no thought for a bushwhacking. He came out from behind his rock, exposing himself, as the owlhoot came in crouched toward Dolman's now prone form.

Bill raised his carbine. His sights were lining up Maynar. He had no intention of missing his first shot. But all at once, May-

nar's gun wrist snapped up. He leaped to one side as he pulled. Bill fired, but his shot went wild.

In that same instant, as he quickly jerked the Winchester's lever, he saw Maynar stagger back. Two blasts had exploded from Hart Dolman's gun muzzle.

The owlhoot spun and attempted to throw down again, but instead, his arms spread and he folded at the middle. . . .

BILL SHAW let the hammer of his carbine down easily, glad that he had not been successful with that shot. It was better that Dolman had done his own killing in a fair fight.

He hurried in and dropped to his knees beside Dolman. The big man had rolled on to his back, his eyes staring at the empty sky. His breathing was hard and short.

"Hang fast, feller," Bill encouraged. "It's my turn now."

He loped to the pool and scooped up a hatful of water.

Dolman coughed sharply as his friend sloshed the ice-cold water in his face. Bill sprinted back to the pool for more water, and this time gave the wounded man a drink.

"Now, where's all the trouble, amigo?" he asked.

"Left arm, mostly, Bill. Hit my head some when I fell. But it's clearin' now. Main thing is I'm alive—lucky at that. An' Lucky Maynar wasn't so lucky."

Bill moved off to bring up the horses. He helped Dolman into the bay's saddle, while he forked Streak.

"What'll we do about Maynar?" he asked, before they rode off across the Mesa. He was not too surprised at Dolman's reply.

"We'll come back later an' bury him, Bill. I shot the bad out of him. What's left is part of my own father—a real good man. Lucky got his bad streak from the Maynars—his mother's folks, Border hellers if you ever saw any."

For a long moment Dolman stared at the limp shape stretched on the Mesa. Then he kneed his bay around and followed Bill on back to the camp in the woods.

At his father's main shack, Bill, with the help of Sheriff Lake, set and splinted Hart's broken arm. He then went to work on some breakfast. Now and then he turned to make a sly survey of Sheriff Lake, whose gaunt face was smothered in bushy grayed whis-

[*Turn page*]

Prepare FOR YOUR Future

In The GREAT SHOPS of COYNE

Your Choice of TWO GREAT FIELDS

ELECTRICITY OR RADIO

ONLY A FEW SHORT WEEKS FOR EITHER COURSE!

Not a Correspondence Course!

Prepare for the future with ALL-AROUND TRAINING. Come to the SHOPS OF COYNE in Chicago, the school with 48 years of training experience, and be ready in a few weeks! You get actual shop work on full-size equipment plus necessary theory. Whether you had previous experience or not makes no difference at Coyne.

ELECTRICITY

INCLUDING INDUSTRIAL ELECTRONICS

Big future in Power Plant Work, Motors, Armature Winding, Home and Factory Wiring, Appliances, Refrigeration, Maintenance, Illumination, etc. Electricians are in demand everywhere — lifetime job service. Many earn while learning. Send for BIG FREE BOOK on COYNE Training.

RADIO ELECTRONICS TELEVISION

A great field now, even greater growth ahead. Here at COYNE you're trained for Construction, Testing, Trouble-Shooting on Radio, Public Address, Sound Picture Units, Training includes FM, Photo-cells, Television, etc. Our training is quick, easy, practical. Many Coyne trained men own well-paying radio businesses of their own.

We'll Finance Your Training

Non-Veterans who are short of money can finance most of their tuition and pay it in easy monthly payments after graduation.

ANY MAN WITH A PHYSICAL DISABILITY
Whether a Veteran or not may qualify for training at no cost to himself for tuition or subsistence. Check coupon for details.

VETERANS
Coyne also is equipped to train those who qualify for training under the G.I. Bill of Rights. Check Coupon.

Electric Refrigeration

This training means additional opportunities. Training in this field now added to our Electrical or Radio course — no extra charge.

MAIL COUPON FOR FACTS!

See how we make it EASY for you to get ready NOW. Check course you prefer and rush coupon to us for full details, FREE. No obligation—no salesman will call. Do it today.

Pick Your Field — Get Book Free

B. W. COOKE, Director
COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
Dept. 57-84K
500 S. Paulina St., Chicago 12, Ill.

Send me your BIG FREE BOOK—for the course checked below. Also full details of your Student Finance Plan.

☐ ELECTRICITY ☐ RADIO
☐ Send G.I. Bulletin ☐ Physical Disability

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

kers. The sheriff was not an old man in years, but this confinement and the treatment he received at the hands of Maynar had transformed him into a weak old man, which only time and the care of his lovely young wife could remedy.

Bill fried thick slices of side bacon, brewed strong coffee and whipped up fresh baking-powder bannock.

They ate in silence for a while—the sheriff paying particular attention to his steaming hot coffee, which he strained through his whiskers with much enjoyment.

IT WAS Dolman who spoke first. He turned to Sheriff Lake, a faint smile widening his thin mouth.

"Well, Sheriff," he began softly, "there's a poster out for me. It's tacked on to the wall of yore house. What's the law got to say now? Yuh aim to take me in?"

Sheriff Lake chuckled.

"I'd admire to have yuh come in, shore, Dolman," he said. "I'd like yuh both to come in, so my wife could thank yuh, so I can thank yuh all I know how for ever'thin' yuh've done. I reckon that young button Davie'd be right glad to be settin' in while I tell the folks what yuh did. But what plans have yuh made for yoreselves?"

Dolman dipped a piece of bannock in bacon grease and munched slowly for a while. Now his sharp eyes were trained on Bill Shaw.

"It depends on Bill here," he replied. "We rode with death across Lost Mesa. I reckon there's plenty of room for the two of us up here, an' I'd admire to tie in with yuh, Bill. We can replace yore little pack mare with Lucky's little blooded black. Looks like good wild hoss country to me."

Bill Shaw's brows flicked up. His face lighted with enthusiasm.

"Yuh mean that, Hart?"

Dolman nodded.

"Nothin' to stop me, unless the law needs further satisfaction," he intoned, glancing slyly at the sheriff.

"Law? Why, I was just figgerin' out how big a reward is comin' to you two wild hoss hunters," Lake exploded. "Don't worry about the law, Dolman. I'll clear yuh with the Cheyenne authorities, an' when I come back to pick up the cached loot taken from the stage-coach outfit, I'll bring that reward with me."

Bill shot a swift glance at Dolman, and then turned to the sheriff.

"If it's all the same to you, Sheriff," he said, "both Hart an' I have ideas about that reward. Bring in papers an' we'll sign it over to one Davie Lake. It'll help put him through a good college, an' you can tell him from me, Sheriff, that the first colt we raise here that's anywheres a ringer for Streak, I'll be gentlin', special for him."

The sheriff's eyes blinked sharply, and he bent over his food.

Later in the day, Bill and Dolman escorted Lake across the Mesa. He was riding the owl-hooters' bay gelding. At the flat rock near the falls, they pulled up and shook hands all round.

"My respects to yore wife an' boy, Sheriff," Hart Dolman said.

Bill Shaw was silent. He waved as Lake rode off. Then he kneed the stallion over alongside the sleek little black mare, and both men continued on their way.

In a short time they rode their mounts up close to the edge of the pool, and gazed in bewilderment at the falls, never before having had time to observe its extraordinary beauty. With a sigh, Bill turned.

"There's dishes to wash, pardner," he said. "An' yuh've got to get some rest. When yuh wake up, we'll have a long medicine talk—mostly about horses."

They rode off, and Dolman's eyes were smiling and grateful as he stared at the broad back of his new pardner.

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

A MANSION FOR MAYBELLE

A Broken Bow Story

By L. ERNENWEIN

PLUS MANY OTHER SMASHING YARNS BY POPULAR WRITERS!

THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 9)

much reduced. The Indians would a lot rather beg the beef than fight a well armed crew for it.

When the trail drives were at their best, the buffalo hunters had already run off or killed practically all the buffalo in that part of the Territory and the Indians, having no cattle of their own, needed beef.

Strangers Were Welcome

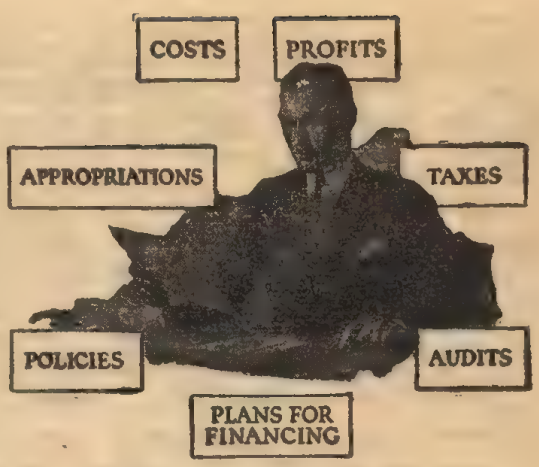
Strangers in a trail camp were always welcomed. They were treated most cordially, but they were watched, watched for any sign that would betray them as cattle rustlers, horse thieves, or outlaws. In some instances horse thieves would call upon a camp and after they had been invited to spend the night, would steal away before daylight and take with them a number of horses belonging to the cavvy of the trail herd. Some of those old trail drivers were excellent character readers and were quick to spot any move that seemed to be characteristic of the thief or outlaw.

It was this long hard grind on the trail up to the market with the herds that made the cowboys want to celebrate when they reached town. They were usually not a bad lot, but just seemed bound to let off steam, and in celebrating in town they fired their six-guns a lot, not with the intention of being mean or tough, but just in the spirit of celebration. There were of course some among the trail drivers who were naturally tough, who were mean, and who delighted in creating a disturbance or trouble.

When the trail herd arrived at the market, it was usually kept herded out at the edge of town or a little distant from town. The boss usually went into town and put up at the drovers cottage, or drovers hotel, as this hotel or boarding house was then what now might be termed the livestock exchange. The sale of cattle usually took place in the hotel.

It was here that the cattlemen and the cattle buyers met, and not all the cattle sold at Dodge City, Hayes, or Abilene, was shipped to eastern markets. Great herds of cattle were bought at the markets by Northwestern cattlemen and driven on to their ranges, some herds being driven from the Kansas markets out to Wyoming for stocker cattle there.

[*Turn page*]



Become an Expert Accountant

The Profession That Pays

The demand for skilled accountants—*men who really know their business*—is increasing. National and state legislation is requiring of business—both big and small—much more in matters relating to Auditing, Cost Accounting, Business Law, Organization, Management, Finance. Men who prove their qualifications in this important field are promoted to responsible executive positions—given an opportunity to earn real salaries. The range is from $3,000 to $10,000 a year, even to higher income figures.

Send for Free Book—

"Accountancy, the Profession That Pays"

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you may equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable, growing profession?

Knowledge of bookkeeping unnecessary. Our free book on accountancy fully explains how we train you from ground up, or according to your individual needs. Low cost; easy terms.

The facts about the new LaSalle training in Accountancy and the opportunities in this highly profitable field are clearly outlined in a 48-page book which LaSalle will send you *free*.

The man in earnest to get ahead will find this coupon a most profitable aid to progress. If you have the urge and the will to increase your income, clip and mail the coupon NOW.

G. I. APPROVED

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY

A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION

Dept. 6329-HR, 417 So. Dearborn St., Chicago 5

I would welcome details of opportunities in accounting, together with copy of "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays," without obligation.

☐ **Higher Accountancy**

Other LaSalle Opportunities:
LaSalle opens the way to success in every important field of business. If interested in one of the fields below, check and mail.

☐ Business Management
☐ Modern Salesmanship
☐ Traffic Management
☐ Foremanship
☐ Industrial Management
☐ Stenotypy (Machine Shorthand)
☐ Law—Degree of LL.B.
☐ Commercial Law
☐ Modern Business Correspondence
☐ Expert Bookkeeping
☐ C.P.A. Coaching

Name.....

Present Position.....

Address.....

"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!"

THERE'S A THRILL IN BRINGING A CROOK TO JUSTICE THROUGH SCIENTIFIC

CRIME DETECTION!

I have taught thousands this exciting, profitable, pleasant profession. Let me teach you, too, in your own home. Learn Finger Printing, Firearms Identification, Police Photography and Criminal Investigation thoroughly, quickly, and at small cost.

53% of All American Bureaus of Identification employ students or graduates of I. A. S. You, too, can fit yourself to fill a responsible crime detection job with good pay and steady employment. But don't delay—get the details now. Let me show you how easily and completely I can prepare you for this fascinating work, during spare time, in your own home. You may pay as you learn. Write today . . . Now . . . Be sure to state age.

Be A FINGER PRINT Expert

FREE!!! Send for Thrilling "BLUE BOOK OF CRIME"

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 796-A, Chicago 40, Illinois

FREE ENLARGEMENT of your Favorite Photo

FROM FAMOUS HOLLYWOOD FILM STUDIOS

Just to get acquainted we will make a beautiful 5 x 7 enlargement of any picture or negative. Be sure to include color of hair, eyes and clothing and get our bargain offer for having your enlargement beautifully hand colored in oil and mounted in your choice of handsome frames. Limit 2 to a customer. Please enclose 10c to cover cost of handling and mailing each enlargement. Your original picture or negative will be returned with the FREE 5 x 7 enlargement postpaid. Act now! Offer limited to U. S. A.

HOLLYWOOD FILM STUDIOS
7021 Santa Monica Blvd., Dept. 284, Hollywood, Calif.

● MECHANICS • HOME STUDY

Step up your own skill with facts & figures of your trade. Audels Mechanics Guides contain Practical Inside Trade Information in handy form. Fully illustrated. Easy to Understand. Highly Endorsed. Check book you want for 7 days' Free Examination. Send no Money. Nothing to pay postman. ☐Carpentry $6 • ☐Auto $4 • ☐ Oil Burners $1 ☐Sheet Metal $1 • ☐Welding $1 • ☐ Refrigeration $4 ☐Plumbing $6 • ☐Masonry $6 • ☐Painting $2 • ☐Radio $4 ☐Electricity $4 • ☐Mathematics $2 • ☐Steam Engineers $4 ☐Machinist $4 • ☐Blueprint $2 • ☐Diesel $2 • ☐Drawing $2. If satisfied you pay only $1 a month until price is paid.

AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23 St., New York 10, N. Y.

LAW STUDY AT HOME for PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS. 38 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. Send for FREE BOOK.
AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 77-T, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

WRIST WATCH
Complete with New Style
EXPANSION BAND

7 JEWEL $12.95

15 JEWEL $16.95

Sensational value! Genuine Military wrist watch precision built, split-second timekeeper, your choice of 15 jewel movement for ONLY $16.95 plus tax! Or 7 jewel movement for only $12.95 plus tax. Waterproof, shock-protected, anti-magnetic, Radium dial and hands, easily read in the dark, unbreakable crystal, red sweep second hand. Handsome, non-corrosive stainless steel case. Genuine non-corrosive stainless steel expansion bracelet fits all wrists. Order yours today!

SEND NO MONEY! Rush order now stating which watch you want. Pay postman price listed above plus postage and 10% Fed. tax. If not delighted, return within 10 days for refund.

BURTON SALES COMPANY
809 W. MADISON ST, DEPT. D-14 CHICAGO 7, ILL.

Usually there might be several herds of cattle and several camps just outside the market town, and while it was necessary for a few of each crew to stay with the cattle, those who were not on duty would rush into town for celebrating just as soon as the herd was bedded down and the guards set for the night. The remainder of the crew saddled and went to town. They had come up the trail like the buffalo, wild and woolly. They were long-haired and unshaven.

Usually the first thing they did was to go to a barber shop, the second to buy a new set of clothes. The striped or checkered trousers, the run-down-at-the-heel boots, the hickory shirt, were all worn out and fit to be discarded.

Abilene was wide open. It gave the cowpuncher the keys of the town and told him to cut loose and have a big time. There was whisky by the barrel. The roulette wheel rolled day and night. Chuck-a-luck and Mexican monte were there for those who preferred them.

Hard-eyed men with pallid faces, in Prince Albert coats and white shirts, most expert of finger, waited to accommodate those who wished to try their luck at faro and poker. The dance halls employed plenty of girls eager to treat the cowboy like he was the most welcome visitor who ever came to town, especially as long as his money lasted.

The Worst Trail Towns

The worst trail towns were Abilene and Dodge City. In their evil prime they were full of vice, lawlessness and crime. So great did the reputation of Dodge City, as a hell-roaring town become, that it is said a cowboy once got on the train somewhere East of the town, and when the conductor came through collecting fares the cowboy handed him a ten dollar bill. When the conductor asked the destination of the puncher, he said, "I want a one-way ticket to hell." The conductor took out the fare, handed the puncher back the change, and said, "Get off at Dodge."

The desperadoes and scoundrels with whom the West was afflicted for years after the Civil War flocked to these towns, drawn by the magnet of easy money. Thieves, swindlers, confidence men, killers and cattle rustlers, they were all there. The best of

the cowboys held aloof from them. The careless and profligate allowed themselves to become victims. Drunkenness, robbery, and murder became so common as to excite little notice.

The theory of the merchants at first was that the boom must be encouraged and that a wide-open town was good for business. But conditions became so flagrant that a check was necessary.

Marshals Had Their Troubles

Man after man tried to fill the job of marshal and gave up within a few days. It became a matter of pride among the wilder spirits to mock the authority of an officer. An ordinance was passed in Abilene against the firing of guns in town. The posters announcing it were shot to fragments. Two men were imported from St. Louis to keep the peace. They left on the next train. One marshal arrested a trail camp cook and put him in jail. His companions drove the officer to cover and rescued the prisoner.

How far the cowboy on a tear went de-

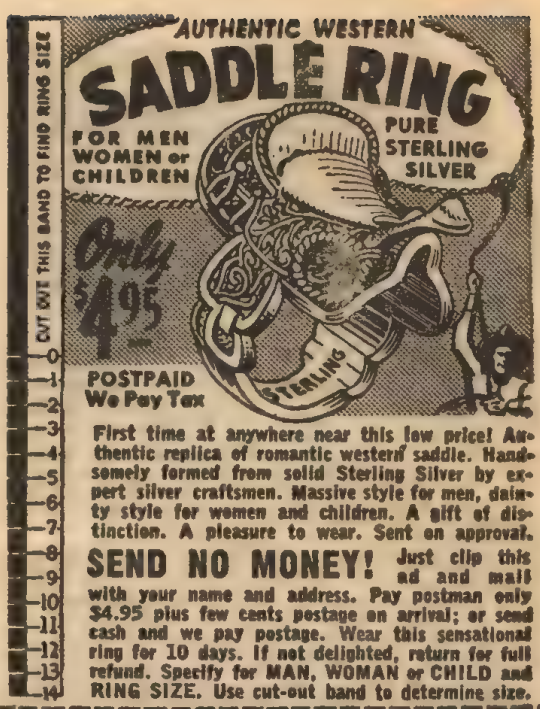
[*Turn page*]

Plenty to SEE from Cover to Cover!

ENTERTAINING, UP-TO-THE-MINUTE PHOTO FEATURES ON EVERY PAGE!

●

NOW ON SALE—10c AT ALL STANDS



First time at anywhere near this low price! Authentic replica of romantic western saddle. Handsomely formed from solid Sterling Silver by expert silver craftsmen. Massive style for men, dainty style for women and children. A gift of distinction. A pleasure to wear. Sent on approval.

SEND NO MONEY! Just clip this ad and mail with your name and address. Pay postman only $4.95 plus few cents postage on arrival; or send cash and we pay postage. Wear this sensational ring for 10 days. If not delighted, return for full refund. Specify for MAN, WOMAN or CHILD and RING SIZE. Use cut-out band to determine size.

10 DAY TRIAL ORDER COUPON

ARIZONA CRAFTSMEN ROOM 606F
1904 FARNAM ST. OMAHA 2, NEBRASKA

SEND Sterling Saddle Ring as I have indicated below.
☐ C.O.D. ☐ Cash Enclosed, Send Postpaid

NAME_____
ADDRESS_____
CITY_____ STATE_____
☐ Men's ☐ Women's ☐ Child's Ring Size ____

RUPTURED?

Get Relief This Proven Way

Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book, "Advice To Ruptured," and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write:

Cluthe Sons, Dept. 33, Bloomfield, New Jersey

WANT A U·S·GOVERNMENT JOB ?

START
$1,756 to $3,021 Year

Men—Women Get Ready Immediately
Common education usually sufficient
Veterans Get Preference
Mail Coupon today sure

COUPON

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. G94, Rochester 4, N. Y.

Sirs: Rush to me without charge (1) 32-page book with list of many U. S. Government Big Pay Dependable Job. (2) Tell me how to get one of these jobs.

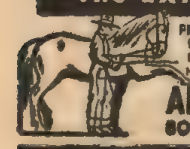
Name.....
Address.....Vet?.....

VETERANS! ••• HONORABLE
DISCHARGE RING Genuine STERLING SILVER Gold Finish

HERE'S A VALUE! Handsome, hefty Genuine Sterling Silver HONORABLE DISCHARGE RING, yellow gold finish, for only $1.98 plus tax. Beautiful Discharge Emblem on handsome scrolled mounting. A magnificent ring you'll wear for life.

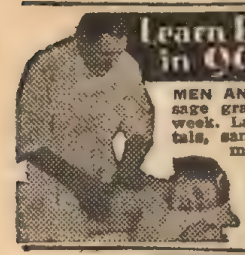
SEND NO MONEY Mail your name, address, and ring size today. Your Genuine Sterling Gold Finish DISCHARGE RING will be sent to you AT ONCE. Pay your postman only $1.98 plus tax and postage. Wear the ring 10 days, if not delighted, return it and your money will be refunded at once. Yes, your satisfaction guaranteed! ORDER TODAY. Send strip of paper for size.
Charles Stewart, 616 Walnut St., Dept. M-205, Cincinnati 2, O.

LAW STUDY AT HOME for PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS. 38 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. Send for FREE BOOK.
AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 77-T, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

HORSE MASTERY!
A FINE HOBBY — A GREAT VOCATION!
"The EXPERT HORSEMAN"
SUBSCRIBE TODAY 50¢ One Year

FREE BOOK — Tells how You can learn to: BREAK COLTS, GAIT SHOW HORSES, TRAIN RODEO, STOCK and RACE HORSES, BREAK BAD HABITS, HANDLE ANY HORSE. TRAIN CIRCUS TRICK HORSES. WRITE TODAY!
ANIMAL LOVERS ASSOCIATION
BOX TH-157 TARZANA, CALIFORNIA

LEG SUFFERERS
Why continue to suffer without attempting to do something? Write today for New Booklet—"THE LIEPE METHODS FOR HOME USE." It tells about Varicose Ulcers and Open Leg Sores. Liepe Methods used *while you walk*. More than 40 years of success. Praised and endorsed by multitudes.
FREE BOOKLET
LIEPE METHODS, 3284 N. Green Bay Ave., Dept. F-40, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

BE A DETECTIVE
WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write to GEO. R. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.


Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home
MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 50—Many Swedish Massage graduates make $50, $75 or even more per week. Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. You can win independence and prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma, Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE—Now! THE College of Swedish Massage, Dept. 7630, 100 E. Ohio St., Chicago 11, Ill.

GOOD MONEY FOR YOUR SPARE TIME
Be our Dealer in your locality for STRONG UNION MADE WORK AND SPORT GARMENTS. No experience necessary. Easy work. Millions of workers buy work uniforms. We supply everything needed. Write immediately for FREE Outfit.
ROBT. STRONG GARMENT CO., 319-337 W. Van Buren St., Dept. K-8, Chicago, Ill.

pended upon his native taste for trouble. Most of them made a good deal of noise, but held themselves in hand and did not get into serious trouble. However, quarrels flared up between professional gamblers and the punchers. There were crooked games, and of course when a puncher learned that he had been cheated he was ready to fight, and among the many gamblers there were some who were very quick on the draw.

Finally, there was so much lawlessness that the city dads decided that Abilene should have a city marshal with reputation enough or courage enough to cow the tough element and restore law and order. About that time there drifted into Abilene a man named Tom Smith, who had been marshal at Kit Carson, Colorado, and it was said that he had won the respect of all who knew him.

He was so mild-mannered that at first the officials of Abilene did not think him capable of dealing with the tough men of that town, but they finally appointed him because there was no one else to take the job.

Smith's theory was that wild cowboys and guns were a bad combination, so when Smith asked the mayor to make a rule that cowboys and others would not be permitted to wear their six-guns in town, the mayor thought that he was crazy, but he did make the rule. As soon as it was known, Big Hank, a giant of a cowboy desperado, came up with his gun hanging at his side and dared the marshal, who was unarmed, to try and take it away from him.

Instead of a gun the mild-mannered marshall relied upon a hefty punch which he landed upon the big cowboy, with the result that the cowboy was knocked cold. His gun was taken away and he was thrown into jail.

Another Challenge

As the news of what had happened to Big Hank spread, Wyoming Frank, another tough hombre, went in to show up the new marshal. With gun in hand he swaggered toward the marshal, making boasts as to what he was going to do to this particular lawman, but he got too close and that chain-lightning right of the officer crashed to the chin. Wyoming Frank was down and out. He woke up in the calaboose.

Abilene opened its eyes. This was not the sort of thing it had been expecting. Unarmed men were not in the habit of walking

up to ruffians garnished with sixshooters and knocking them cold. The courage of it won the heart of the cowtown. Smith became the hero of the trail drivers.

For six months Smith held the office of marshal, during which time he held Abilene down to a reasonable decorum. It was no Sunday-school town, but life and property were reasonably safe. The thugs hunted cover and vice was not flaunted openly. Then Smith, with his deputy, rode out of town to arrest a man named McConnell, who had killed a neighbor. As he walked up to the dugout where the murderer had taken refuge, McConnell shot him down from a window.

Thus one of the bravest of lawmen, marshal of one of the toughest towns of the West, died with his boots on as did many other brave lawman who helped in the taming of the West.

Well, waddies, guess that is all from the old Bunk House this trip. Will be watching and waiting for your next visit. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

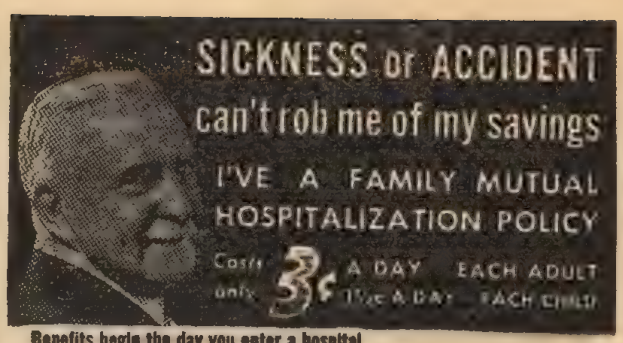
WHEN Montana was still a Territory and private outfits maintained the highways for the tolls they could collect from travelers, a powerful man named King Baker gained control of the heavily-traveled roads leading into Montana's Virginia City, hired a crew of gun-slammers to operate his toll stations, and boosted the tolls to outrageous amounts.

As Baker was within certain rights in doing this, neither General Custer nor James M. Ashley, governor of the Territory, could officially put a stop to it. They could, however, secretly enlist the aid of the Rio Kid who was ever ready to battle oppression and injustice.

So it was that the Rio Kid, otherwise known as Bob Pryor, a former captain of cavalry in the Union Army, rode with his Mexican saddlemate, Celestino Mireles, right smack into the highway feud that was bitterly raging in the mountainous country surrounding Virginia City, a terrain so rugged as to cause Celestino to exclaim, *"Por dios,* thees country she's stand on end!"

The whole story's told in the exciting novel of blazing guns and glamour in the next

[*Turn page*]


SICKNESS or ACCIDENT
can't rob me of my savings
I'VE A FAMILY MUTUAL
HOSPITALIZATION POLICY
Costs only 3¢ A DAY EACH ADULT
Five A DAY EACH CHILD

Benefits begin the day you enter a hospital
FOR SICKNESS OR ACCIDENT
Hospital Expenses paid, up to (beginning with the first day) $540.00
FOR ACCIDENT
Doctor Expense paid, up to $135.00
Loss of Wages reimbursed up to $300.00
Loss of Life by Accident $1000.00
WAR COVERAGE AND EXTRA BENEFITS
Childbirth Expense paid, up to $75.00

Sickness or accident can easily wipe out, in a few weeks, savings it may have taken years to accumulate. Don't let this happen to you. With a Family Mutual Hospitalization policy you'll be able to pay your hospital bills. In case of accident, you will be reimbursed for your doctor expenses and for loss of time from work. You may choose any hospital in the United States and your own family doctor may attend you. Benefits applying to children are 50% of those paid adults.

MAIL COUPON TODAY—No Agent Will Bother You

FAMILY MUTUAL LIFE INSURANCE CO., WILMINGTON 99, DEL.

Family Mutual Life Insurance Co.
601 Shipley St., Wilmington 99, Del. TG-21

Please send me, without obligation, complete information on your Economical Hospitalization Plan.

NAME _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ STATE _____

DETECTIVES
TRAINING—SECRET INVESTIGATIONS—FINGER PRINTS
Easy Method—Short Time. Home—Travel—Secret Code-Booklet FREE — WRITE, INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM, 1701-T Monroe St., N. E., Washington, D. C. 18.

LATEST STYLES
EYE-GLASSES
TRY by MAIL NOW
SEND NO MONEY
TEST YOUR OWN SIGHT at Home with our New Patented Sight Testers.
16 DAYS TRIAL OFFER
GLASSES As Low As
MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE!
NEW LOW PRICES
FREE If you're not 100% satisfied with glasses we make we will refund every cent you pay us. Repairs: 48 CATALOG and scientific test chart. Hr. Service!
U. S. EYE-GLASSES CO. 1557 MILWAUKEE AVE., DEPT. G-82, CHICAGO, ILL.

LEARN AT HOME
TO BE A PRACTICAL NURSE
You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. Thousands of graduates.
HIGH SCHOOL NOT REQUIRED
48th yr. One graduate has charge of 10-bed hospital. Another saved $400 while learning. Equipment included. Men, women, 18 to 60. Easy tuition payments. Trial plan.
CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 425, 100 East Ohio Street, Chicago 11, Ill.
Please send free booklet and 16 sample lesson pages.
Name.....
City.....State.....Age.....

HOME-STUDY BRINGS BIGGER PAY

Don't be caught napping when Opportunity knocks. Prepare for advancement and more money by training *now* for the job ahead. *Free 48-Page Books Tell How.* Write for the book on the business field you like —or mail us this ad with your name and address in the margin. *Now*, please.

☐Higher Accountancy ☐Business Management
☐Traffic Management ☐Salesmanship
☐Law—Degree of LL.B. ☐Expert Bookkeeping
☐Commercial Law ☐C. P. A. Coaching
☐Stenotypy (Machine Shorthand)

G. I. APPROVED

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A Correspondence Institution
Dept. 6329-R, 417 So. Dearborn St., Chicago 5

POCKET ADDING MACHINE

Sturdy steel construction for lifetime use. Adds, subtracts, aids multiplication. Capacity 999,999.99. A real machine—guaranteed 5 years. Thousands of satisfied users. Send name and address. We ship immediately. On delivery, pay postman $2.50 (plus C.O.D. and postage charges). If you send $2.50 with order, we pay postage. Leatherette case 25c additional. Your money back after 10 days' trial if not satisfied.

Free Trial $2.50

TAVELLA SALES CO., Dept. 111, 25 West Broadway, New York 7, N. Y.

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men. Caution: Use only as directed.

30 Years in Business

FREE BOOK

THE HEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton, Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

USED Correspondence Courses

Complete HOME-STUDY COURSES and self-instruction textbooks, slightly used. Rented, sold, exchanged. All subjects, 100% satisfaction. Cash paid for used courses. Full details & 100-page illustrated bargain catalog Free.

Write Nelson Co., 1139 S. Wabash Av., Dept. 06, Chicago 5, Ill.

SHORTHAND in 6 Weeks at Home

Famous Speedwriting system. No signs or symbols; uses ABC's. Easy to learn; easy to write and transcribe. Fast preparation for a job. Surprisingly low cost. 300,000 taught by mail. Used in leading offices and Civil Service. Write for free booklet to: Speedwriting, Dept. 9006-7, 55 W. 42 St., N. Y. 18, N. Y.

Expertly Designed into a Beautiful Sunburst Pattern Brooch 1¾ inches in diameter, 18 Carat Gold finish, Cameo Style. Similarity of your Birthstone and Color, or your choice of popular colors. The border of this ad is a description of the Zodiac Signs, a Personalized Charm of the ages. SEND NO MONEY! Just your name and address, your Birthdate and color desired. Pay postman ONLY $1.98 plus postage, or we will send postpaid on payment with order (we pay tax). ORDER TO-DAY. Wear this Beautiful Pin 5 days, if not delighted return and we will refund your money at once. Included Free with your order Your Natural Life Horoscope. Send Birthdate. Charles H. Draving and Co., P.O. Box 20, Feasterville, Penna. Dept. S-TF.

PIN IS ACTUAL SIZE

DEALERS WRITE

issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN. It's called KING OF THE HIGHWAYS and features the Rio Kid at his fighting best. For a sample of the thrills in store for you in KING OF THE HIGHWAYS, by Lee E. Wells, we give you this excerpt taken verbatim from the manuscript:

As the Rio Kid, Celestino, and "Snap" Moran, a teamster they had befriended in bulldozing their way through the toll station blockade in coming into Virginia City, stood at the bar in the Nugget Saloon, a tall man dressed in black seemed to be taking especial interest in the trio. Observing the man's evil, glittering eyes on them in the mirror behind the bar, the Rio Kid asked Snap Moran about him.

"That's Idaho Devlin, top gun dog for King Baker in these parts," Moran said. "He's a mighty touchy gent and thinks a heap of his gun speed. Ain't no one dared buck him yet."

The Rio Kid didn't turn or look in the mirror again, but felt his muscles tense as a sudden silence descended on the room. He heard the clink of Idaho's spurs, then a hard finger tapped him on the shoulder. He turned easily, smiling a little, to meet Idaho Devlin's dark scowl.

"Word's come to me about yuh, mister," Idaho said. "And I don't like what I've heard."

"Such as?" the Rio Kid asked easily.

Celestino had edged away so that the bar would not hamper his draw. He paid little attention to Idaho, knowing the Rio Kid to be capable of defending himself. The young Mexican warily watched the group of gunhawks farther down the bar who seemed waiting for some signal from Devlin.

"Such as the ferry at Jefferson," Idaho answered. "I hear yuh got plumb proddy and rode across without payin' the regular fee. Folks in these parts don't like that."

"Some don't." The Rio Kid's smile grew wider, but his eyes remained frosty. "Others figure different. Me, I don't like to be crowded by a bunch of skunks wearin' guns."

A murmur of approval ran around the big room and Devlin's scowl grew darker. He seemed to fight down his anger and made no move toward his six. His glance shifted swiftly to the gunhawks and then centered on the Rio Kid again.

"Yuh sound to me like a plumb lawless gent. We don't want yore kind in Virginia City or anywhere in Montana. Yuh'd better ride back where yuh come from, mister. Ain't no part of this country goin' to be healthy for yuh."

"Yuh're orderin' me out?" the Rio Kid asked softly. "Suppose I don't go?"

"I can take care of that, too," Idaho said confidently. The Rio Kid sized up the man, the arrogant stance, the glittering eyes and cruel mouth.

"Yuh work for King Baker?"

"Sure—what of it?" Devlin snapped.

"Seems like Baker throws too wide a loop—and maybe you do, too, Devlin. Not much use of augering with yuh, though. There's only one language yore breed of mule-heads understand."

Idaho's eyes widened and a red flush crept up his neck. His lips writhed back and his hand

stabbed downward. The Rio Kid moved with the speed of a released spring. His fist crashed squarely into Devlin's stomach, doubling the man over. His right crossed and smashed into the gunhawk's face, driving him backward, spreading him onto the floor.

It had happened so fast that none of the men in the room had moved. For a long, tensed second gunhawks and miners stared down at the sprawled figure, eyes bulging. Idaho's eyes blinked open and he stared blankly up at the hanging lamp. Then he seemed to realize what had happened.

He twisted to one side, reaching for his Colt. His sudden move broke the paralysis that held the rest. The gunhawks surged forward and the Rio Kid's matched Colts fairly jumped into his hands. Celestino swept his own six from the holster. One of Pryor's Colts covered Devlin and the man's fingers froze a scant inch from his holster, taloned, trembling.

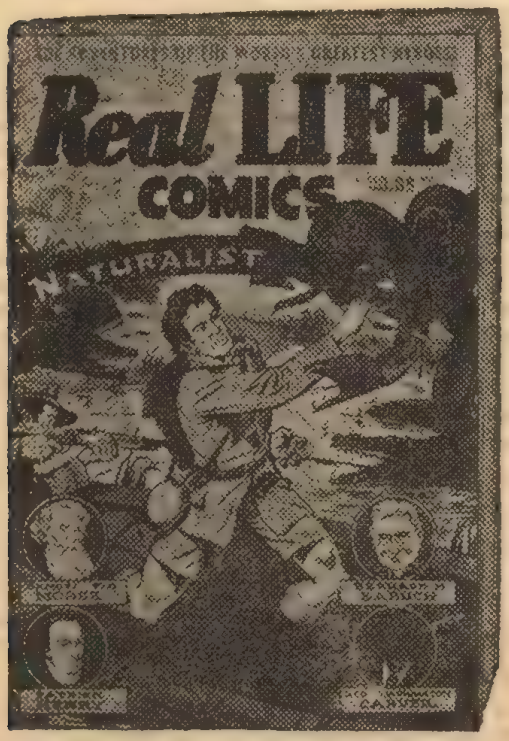
"Yuh won't live long," the Rio Kid said quietly. His other gun had leveled toward the renegades and they stood straining against the black round threat of the muzzle.

"Take him apart, Rio Kid," Snap Moran growled. His six also threatened the bunched renegades. "That gent has always had snakes to back his play. See how much spine he's got alone. Me'n yore pard will hold these skunks plumb still."

Idaho remained propped on one elbow. Saw-

[*Turn page*]

Inspiring True Picture-Stories of Adventure and Achievement!



Approved by Parents and Teachers!

Now On Sale 10c At All Stands

Now for EVERY WORK SHOP!

NEW Invention Electroplates by BRUSH

Easy to Plate CHROMIUM GOLD, SILVER, NICKEL, COPPER

. . . For Pleasure and Profit!

If you have a workshop—at home or in business—you need this new Warner Electroplater. At the stroke of an electrified brush, you can electroplate models and projects—you can replate worn articles, faucets, tools, fixtures, silverware, etc. with a durable, sparkling coat of metal . . . Gold, Silver, Chromium, Nickel, Copper or Cadmium. Method is easy, simple, quick. Everything furnished—equipment complete, ready for use. *By doing a bit of work for others, your machine can pay for itself within a week.* So make your shop complete by getting a Warner Electroplater right away. Send today for FREE SAMPLE and illustrated literature. ACT AT ONCE! *Mail Coupon.*

WARNER ELECTRIC CO., DEPT. M-34
1512 Jarvis Avenue, Chicago 26, Ill.

FREE Details & Sample!

WARNER ELECTRIC CO., 1512 Jarvis Avenue, Chicago 26, Dept. M-34
Gentlemen: Send Free Sample and Details to:
Name
Address
City State

BUY FROM THE OLDEST ESTABLISHED FIRM IN THE UNITED STATES SELLING EYE GLASSES BY MAIL

As Low As $1.95 For Satisfaction

Write Today for Free Catalog. Send No Money!

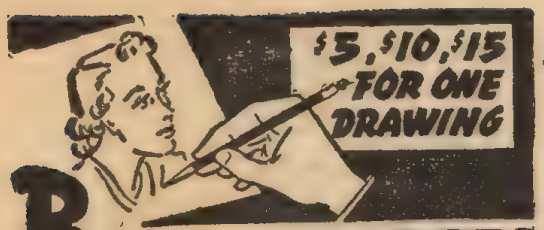
ADVANCE SPECTACLE COMPANY
537 S. Dearborn St., Dept. T-6 Chicago, Ill.

If Ruptured Try This Out

Modern Protection Provides Great Comfort and Holding Security

Without Torturous Truss Wearing

An "eye-opening" revelation in sensible and comfortable reducible rupture protection may be yours for the asking, without cost or obligation. Simply send name and address to William S. Rice, Inc., Dept. 1-B, Adams, N. Y., and full details of the new and different Rice Method will be sent you Free. Without hard flesh-gouging pads or tormenting pressure, here's a Support that has brought joy and comfort to thousands—by releasing them from Trusses with springs and straps that bind and cut. Designed to securely hold a rupture up and in where it belongs and yet give freedom of body and genuine comfort. For full information—write today!



Be an ARTIST!

—Train at Home in Your Spare Time

The fascinating field of Art offers commercial opportunities to men and women. **COMMERCIAL ART, CARTOONING, DESIGNING** all in one complete course. We prepare you step-by-step. Trained Artists are capable of earning $50, $60, $75 a week. Colorful FREE BOOK, "Art for Pleasure and Profit—" describes course and method of instruction. TWO ART OUTFITS included with training. STATE AGE.

WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF ART, Studio 666 H
1115—15th St., N. W. WASHINGTON 5, D. C.

FREE BOOK gives details

TOOTHACHE?

GET QUICK AMAZING RELIEF by placing Dent's Tooth Gum—or Drops—in cavity of aching tooth. Cavity toothache frequently strikes when you can't see dentist. Be prepared! Ask your druggist for either complete aid package. Follow directions. 25¢

DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS

What Every Mason Wants

We have Important Masonic books for Blue Lodge, Chapter, Commandery, Scottish Rite, and Shrine.
OUR RITUALS ARE USED THE WORLD OVER
Send for free catalog of books and rituals for Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, Knights of Columbus, etc.
EZRA A. COOK, Publisher, P. O. 796, GJE, Chicago 90, Ill.

RUPTURE!

An amazing Air-Cushion Invention allows body freedom at work or play. Light, neat, cool, sanitary. Durable, cheap. Day and night protection helps Nature support weakened muscles gently but surely. No risk. **Sent on Trial!** Write NOW for free Booklet and **Proof of Results.** All correspondence confidential.

Brooks Company, 382-H State St., Marshall, Mich.

OUTDOOR JOBS

Study for park ranger, game refuge and railway mail exams. Details free. Write Delmar Institute, M4, Denver, Colo.

What To Do For Pains of

ARTHRITIS

Try This Free

If you have never used "Rosse Tabs" for pains or arthritis, neuritis, rheumatism, we want you to try them at our risk. We will send you a full-size package from which you are to use 24 Tabs FREE. If not astonished at the palliative relief which you enjoy from your sufferings, return the package and you owe us nothing. We mean it! SEND NO MONEY. Just send name and address and we will rush your Tabs by return mail. ROSSE PRODUCTS CO., Dept. 868, 2708 Farwell Ave., Chicago 45, Illinois.

dust stained the back of his shirt and made a brown trail down his trouser leg. His eyes snapped viciously and his lips had pulled back from his teeth.

"Yuh'll lift that six right careful, Devlin, and yuh'll pitch it to the far wall," said the Rio Kid. "If yuh even quiver and eyelash wrong, Boot Hill will have another grave. Shuck that six—pronto!"

Idaho did not move for a long second. Then, slowly his long fingers lifted the heavy Colt from the holster. He glared murder at the Rio Kid and with a long, slow swing, threw the weapon to the far end of the bar.

"Now yuh get up on yore hunkers," the Rio Kid ordered. "Go tell King Baker I don't scare easy at all. Tell him to send something better'n you if he wants me out of town or planted six feet under."

"I'll kill yuh!" Idaho roared.

"I doubt that," the Rio Kid snapped, "but yuh can try any time yuh want. Tell Baker I intend to run every gun-slammer, outlaw, and renegade on his payroll out of the country."

"Yuh won't live that long," Idaho stated defiantly.

A gun blasted above the batwings and a flame lanced from the outer darkness. The slug whined close to the Rio Kid and smashed into the mirror behind the bar. Instantly the Rio Kid's Colt smashed a reply and splinters jumped from one of the doors. It swung open on the impact of the lead.

Celestino's head jerked around and he came to a crouch to meet the surprise attack. This was the chance for which the bunched renegades had waited. Hands slapped down to holsters and Moran's six roared and bucked back in his hand.

"Watch them sons!"

The Rio Kid moved back against the bar and he slammed another shot through the batwings to keep the killer outside at bay. But he realized the situation had slipped out of hand. Idaho had flung himself flat on the sawdust again to be clear of the fire of his own men. Celestino's slug caught a renegade in the shoulder and spun him half around.

In another second, the Rio Kid, Celestino, and Snap Moran would be the targets of a dozen guns at close range. The teamsters and miners in the room had scattered out and they were taking a hand. The Rio Kid's jaws tightened and his sixes pointed upward. Gun thunder rolled from his hands and the hanging lamps smashed out into darkness.

And that's just one of the many danger-packed situations facing the Rio Kid and Celestino in KING OF THE HIGHWAYS, in the next issue! It's a slam-bang fightin' yarn, folks, in which the Rio Kid is called upon for every bit of the miraculous gun skill that has made of him such a legendary Western character.

Also in the next issue, a colorful, full-length, action novelet of Injun fighting days, WHO'LL RIDE WITH ME, by Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson. This, the story of a

commanding officer who did not know Apaches and of a junior cavalry officer who did, is one you'll not soon forget. Filled with Apache treachery, suspense, and the courage of frontier soldiers, we predict that once you start reading this tale you will not put it down until you've read the very last word.

In addition, of course, the next big issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN will contain all the regular departments as well as the usual collection of swell short stories best depicting the raw, far-flung West of earlier days. It's an issue you'll plumb enjoy, pardners!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WE'RE always mighty glad to hear from any of you readers about anything at all, though particularly about your reactions to stories printed in THE RIO KID WESTERN, of course. Our aim is to give you stories you like to read, and when we succeed in this, or when we fail, we like to hear about it. It helps us plan future issues for your maximum enjoyment.

And now to a few of the many grand letters we've been receiving lately:

I get every issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN and find it a grand magazine, but in IDAHO RAIDERS, by Tom Curry, in your February issue, you have the Boise Valley "three thousand miles" above sea level. That would mean that this valley would be as high as the U. S. is across. If I'm not right, let me know. —*Ray G. Cook, Lyerly, Ga.*

[*Turn page*]

NOW ON SALE!

The First Issue of

TRIPLE WESTERN

•

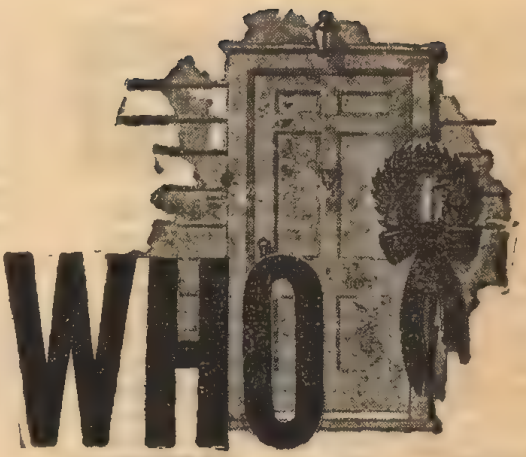
Featuring Three Great Western Novels by Top-flight Authors

MAX BRAND
CLARENCE E. MULFORD
WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

•

196 PAGES OF SIX-GUN THRILLS!

TWENTY-FIVE CENTS AT ALL STANDS!



WHO Will Pay the Bills?

NOW you can secure a safe, sound LIFE INSURANCE POLICY secured by legal reserves by paying only 25c for first month's protection and after that only $1.00 per month, practically 3c per day. Pays FULL BENEFITS for death due to any illness, natural causes or any accident; DOUBLE BENEFITS for death due to auto accident; TRIPLE BENEFITS for death due to travel accident. All benefits are DOUBLED during first 5 years of policy. In addition, your policy gives you CASH and Loan Values, Paid-Up Insurance and Extended Insurance.

NO DOCTOR'S EXAMINATION
FOR MEN, WOMEN, CHILDREN
AGE LIMITS 10 to 65

PLAN No. 1 Pays Up To $4260.
PLAN No. 2 Pays Up To $3525.
PLAN No. 3 Pays Up To $6000.

25¢
Now Pays First Month's Premium for TRIPLE BENEFIT LIFE INSURANCE Secured by Legal Reserves

RUSH COUPON TODAY—No Agent Will Bother You

CROWN LIFE INSURANCE CO.
203 North Wabash Ave., Dept. T-4, Chicago 1, Ill.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ STATE_____

INVENTORS

Learn how to protect your invention. A specially prepared booklet containing detailed information concerning patent protection and procedure with "Record of Invention" form will be forwarded to you upon request—without obligation.

CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON
Registered Patent Attorneys
78-D District National Bldg. Washington 5, D. C.

Let Me Send You FULL SIZE PACKAGES FOOD PRODUCTS FREE

Big box of full size Blair Food and Household Products will be sent FREE F.O.B. Factory to an ambitious man or woman in your town. We give them to you. Just say you want to be a money making Blair Dealer. Show samples—take orders for this line of nearly 250 high quality, guaranteed products needed in every home.

SEND NO MONEY Write us today! Let us send you this Big Assortment of Products so you can test them in your home and learn how easy it is to make money supplying friends and neighbors. Act NOW—Send for the Big Assortment TODAY.

BLAIR, Dept. 534-CE Lynchburg, Va.

ASTHMADOR

THE LARGEST SELLING INHALANT

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

POWDER CIGARETTE OR PIPE MIX

AT ALL DRUG STORES

Springtime brings treacherous days for asthmatics...so your friend the druggist gets busy and orders more of Dr. R. Schiffmann's ASTHMADOR. He knows more sufferers buy ASTHMADOR than any other inhalant treatment. He can tell you why, too—ASTHMADOR is easy to use, dependably uniform, produced under strict laboratory control. That's why you can rely on ASTHMADOR'S easy-breathing fumes to penetrate congestion, reduce the severity of wheezing and coughing attacks. No costly sprays to buy, nothing to take internally. Just light up and BREATHE! Your money back if you can't!

CONFIDENTIAL LOAN SERVICE

Borrow $50 to $300 BY MAIL

Need money? No matter where you live you can borrow BY MAIL $50.00 to $300.00 this easy quick *confidential* way.

IT IS EASY TO BORROW BY MAIL! Completely confidential and private. CONVENIENT MONTHLY PAYMENTS

NO ENDORSERS NEEDED. EMPLOYED MEN and women of good character can solve their money problems quickly and in privacy with loans MADE BY MAIL. No endorsers or co-signers. We do not contact employers, friends or relatives. Convenient monthly payments. Send us your name and address and we will mail application blank and complete details FREE in plain envelope. There is no obligation.

STATE FINANCE CO.

303 Marine Bldg. • Dept. L-82 • New Orleans 12, La.

Extra Special BARGAIN
MEN'S Wrist Watch

Year's Greatest Value!

The Watch You Have Been Waiting For

Swiss Movement! Precision made by Expert Swiss Craftsmen

SUPPLY LIMITED
RUSH YOUR ORDER

A fortunate purchase makes this amazing offer possible. Latest styling, Sweep Second Hand. Easy to read Extra Fancy Dial. Comes complete with Leather Strap. A watch you'll be proud to wear or give as a Gift.

ONLY $6.95
Plus FED. TAX

SEND NO MONEY

—Pay Postman $6.95 plus 70c Fed. Tax and few cents postal charges, or, send $7.65 with order and we pay postage. Return within 10 days if not delighted, for refund providing watch has not been tampered with.

ORDER NOW

AMERICAN MERCHANDISING CO., Inc.
12 Adams Ave. Dept. TQW-47 Montgomery 4, Ala.

You're dead right, Ray. Maybe we were thinking of the Valley of the Moon. Actually, though, the statement was meant to read "three thousand feet" and we just slipped up on it. All of which goes to prove that umpty-nine editors and copy readers can be fooled —once in a while.

I'm a faithful follower of the Rio Kid and Celestino. I haven't been a reader of Westerns long and it was THE RIO KID WESTERN that got me interested in them. Of all I've read, the stories I liked best were CROWN FOR AZORA, COPPER COMMANDMENTS, and HIGHWAY TO BOOTHILL.—*Jimmy Arnold, Dollar, Texas.*

Thanks, Jimmy. Glad you like our magazine.

Your book is the tops, the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles great characters. I especially like stories done by author Tom Curry, but think that all your writers do a splendid job. Keep up the good work.—*A. S. Bulack, Atlantic Beach, Fla.*

Mighty nice words, them. Thanks for writing, pard.

I read THE RIO KID WESTERN and like it very much. I've been trying to find a series character called Long Sam Littlejohn in another magazine, however, and can't seem to locate him. Can you help me out on this?—*Archie B. Donley, Ontario, Calif.*

Sure thing, Archie. Long Sam appears in every other issue of the TEXAS RANGERS, one of our companion magazines. Quite a gent, Long Sam. He's a favorite with us, too!

I have just finished IDAHO RAIDERS, by Tom Curry, in the February issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN, and think it was swell. Why not have Bob Pryor and Celestino go to Sacramento and meet John A. Sutter? That should make a grand adventure story. —*Lew Pearson, Sacramento, Calif.*

That's an idea we'll have to pass on to our authors, Lew. Thanks for sending it along.

I have not read THE RIO KID WESTERN for very long, but it is certainly tops in my estimation. I certainly enjoyed COPPER COMMANDMENTS and look forward to other issues of your magazine.—*Cora Robertson, Clarita, Oklahoma.*

Look forward to that next issue, Cora. It's a top-notcher.

I have been reading THE RIO KID WESTERN for many years and sure do enjoy it. Bob Pryor is my favorite fictional character.—*Mrs. Beatrice Reed, Eufaula, Oklahoma.*

Ours too, Mrs. Reed. He's a man to ride the river with.

I like THE RIO KID WESTERN very much and can hardly wait to see each new issue. I place COPPER COMMANDMENTS as the best story you've ever had in the magazine.—*Tommy McLeon, N. Wilkesboro, N. C.*

That was a good one all right, Tommy. But just wait till you read KING OF THE HIGHWAYS in the next issue!

And that's all for this time, folks. Let's hear from all of you! Just address a postcard or letter to The Editor, THE RIO KID WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. And thanks again, everybody. Be seeing you.

—THE EDITOR.

SHIFTLESS MAN

(Concluded from page 79)

sayin' I didn't sorter enjoy this particular assignment. I reckon the picnic's over now, though."

Jasper Wilson's face was red as a beet. "This makes me look—and feel—like a tarnation fool, Marshal. I—I'm apologizin', for bein' onery."

"It's all right," Sam said, shrugging. "I kind of enjoyed our little fracas, Wilson. Truth is, I was gettin' right rusty. I ain't holdin' hard feelin's." He put his hand out to prove that, and young Wilson grasped it, grinning.

The posse left finally. Sam walked into the rickety house, glanced down at his bunk, and flopped lazily on it. He did not sleep right away though, as was his custom, heavy as his eyelids became. Now that Ballinger was out of the way, Sam knew he would be assigned to a new manhunt.

The prospect was exciting, but still, it worried him some. This job had made him too blamed lazy.

"Oh, well, I'll worry about that when I'm through snoozin'," he thought, smiling in the dark. "Been a right tiresome night's work, any way you look at it."

Ten seconds later he was snoring softly.

STAMMER?

This new 128-page book, "Stammering, Its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogue Unit Method for scientific correction of stammering and stuttering — successful for 46 years. *Free — no obligation.*

GET THIS FREE BOOK!

Benjamin N. Bogue, Dept. 4279, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.

NEW MIDGET ELECTRIC ARC WELDER

RETAILS ONLY $3.95

FULLY GUARANTEED

Plugs into Light Socket—AC or DC

It's new! It's handy! It's efficient! Use the Midget Electric Arc Welder for hundreds of light-metal jobs. Does comparable weldisg work with a 1/16 inch welding rod on thin metal as that of larger and higher priced welders. Operates on 15 ampere fuse, 110 volt 60 cycle A.C. or D.C. current, by use of our special standard-coated 1/16-inch welding rods. Generous supply of rods supplied with machine. Recommended for all light welding like automobile fenders, etc. Take the Midget Arc anywhere to the job. Sturdily built and fully guaranteed. Comes complete—ready to use. Nothnig else to buy. No previous welding experience needed to strike an arc. In a short time, any one mechanically inclined can learnto weld with this machine. You'll find hundreds of money-saving, time-saving uses for the Midget Arc around your home, garage, or workshop. Also in garages, factories, repair shops, tin shops, mechanics, farmers, inventors, etc. Order a Midget Electric Arc Welder now! SEND NO MONEY. We'll rush one to you, complete with rods and helmet (equipped with APPROVED welding glass). Pay postman only $3.95 plus postage charges. If not satisfied, return Midget Arc in 5 days from receipt and we'll refund your money immediately. RUSH YOUR ORDER NOW.

MIDGET ARC WELDER CO., Strader Ave., Dept. W-233, Cincinnati 26, Ohio

PICTURE RING $1.

Made from Any Photo or Picture! SEND NO MONEY!

Exquisite Picture Ring—made from any photo. SEND NO MONEY! Mail photo with paper strip for ring size. Pay postman only $1 plus postage. Hand tinted 25c extra. Photo returned with ring. Money back guarantee. SEND PHOTO AND RING SIZE NOW!

PICTURE RING CO. Dept. L-26, CINCINNATI 2, Ohio

LAW...

STUDY AT HOME Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before.

More Ability: More Prestige: More Money We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send NOW. G. I. APPROVED.

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY, 417 South Dearborn Street
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 6329-L Chicago 5, Ill.

Fit-Rite makes False Teeth TIGHT

Makes loose dental plates fit snugly and comfortably. LASTS for MONTHS!

Simply squeeze on dental plate and put it in your mouth. Hardens and becomes part of plate. Money-back guarantee.

FREE Generous package of Dental Plate Cleanser with each order. Send $1.00 or mailed parcel post collect.

Fit-Rite Co., 1573 Milwaukee Ave. Dept. 6-82, Chicago, Ill.

High School Course at Home Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H-A56, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING-

(OR IS IT?)

BY GROUCHO MARX

WHAT do you want to save up a lot of money for? You'll never need the stuff.

Why, just think of all the wonderful, wonderful things you can do *without* money. Things like—well, things like—

On second thought, you'd better keep on saving, chum. Otherwise you're licked.

For instance, how are you ever going to build

that Little Dream House, without a trunk full of moolah? You think the carpenters are going to work free? Or the plumbers? Or the architects? Not those lads. They've been around. They're no dopes.

And how are you going to send that kid of yours to college, without the folding stuff?

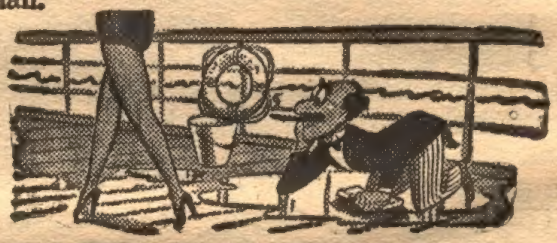
Maybe you think he can work his way through by playing the flute.

If so, you're crazy. (Only three students have ever worked their way through college by playing the flute. And they had to stop eating for four years.)

And how are you going to do that world-traveling you've always wanted to do? Maybe you think you can stoke your way across, or scrub decks. Well, that's no good. I've tried it. It interferes with shipboard romances.

So—all seriousness aside—you'd better keep on saving, pal.

Obviously the best way is by continuing to buy U. S. Savings Bonds—through the Payroll Plan.



They're safe and sound. Old Uncle Sam *personally* guarantees your investment. And he never fobbed off a bum I.O.U. on *anybody*.

You get four bucks back for every three you put in. And that ain't hay, alfalfa, or any other field-grown product.

Millions of Americans—smart cookies all—have found the Payroll Plan the easiest and best way to save.

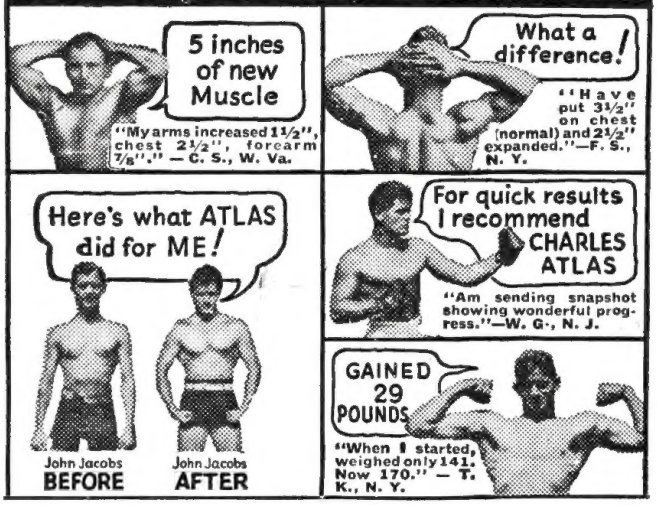
So stick with the Payroll Plan, son—and you can't lose.

SAVE THE EASY WAY... BUY YOUR BONDS THROUGH PAYROLL SAVINGS

Contributed by this magazine in co-operation with the Magazine Publishers of America as a public service.

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*

LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE


5 inches of new Muscle
"My arms increased 1½", chest 2½", forearm ⅞"." — C. S., W. Va.
What a difference!
"Have put 3½" on chest (normal) and 2½" expanded."—F. S., N. Y.
Here's what ATLAS did for ME!
John Jacobs BEFORE
John Jacobs AFTER
For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS
"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress."—W. G., N. J.
GAINED 29 POUNDS
"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170." — T. K., N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest — **In competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.**

This photo of Charles Atlas is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"*Dynamic Tension!*" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your Strength through "*Dynamic Tension*" you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid MUSCLE.

My method—"*Dynamic Tension*"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "*Dynamic Tension*" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK

"Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from - the - shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 476, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 476.
115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "*Dynamic Tension*" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name..... Age.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City..... State.....

"Let's build here—they're certainly good to guests!"

Sensible hosts know that wise guests prefer Calvert.
They enjoy its pleasing lightness,
palatable taste, all-around whiskey agreeableness...
call it "the whiskey of moderation." Have you tried it?
When you do, you'll understand why

Clear Heads Choose Calvert

Calvert

BLENDED WHISKIES

Reserve OR *Special*

Calvert Distillers Corp., N.Y.C. BLENDED WHISKEY 86.8 Proof
Calvert "Reserve"—65% Grain Neutral Spirits...Calvert "Special"—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits